

Polling Memo: Development of Local Communities. Part 1.

[Pact](#), an international non-profit organization, is launching a series of publications on the results of a national study on Belarusians' participation in the development of local communities implemented by SATIO Group of Companies. The study took place between March 2nd and April 3rd, 2015 in the form of personal interviews of citizens between the ages of 18 and 75. The interviews were conducted in the citizens' official residences and covered a representative sample of 1,000 respondents – with the sample representation error not exceeding 3.1% and a confidence level of 95%.

The idea for the study emerged from a performance analysis of the [Community Development Fund](#), which has been administered by Pact since 2009. The main research objective was to gain reliable data to assess the actual extent of Belarusians' engagement in the development of their respective communities and to uncover major motivations and other factors affecting civic participation. Pact believes that community development constitutes an integral part of creating a strong and healthy modern society in Belarus. We hope that public associations, initiatives, and local authorities will find the study's findings useful for understanding population involvement in constructive local-level social changes. Additionally, Pact encourages the readers to review the data on [local community surveys](#) and [real-life local development stories](#).

This analytical memo covers the key findings and conclusions regarding the perception of the term “local community” among the citizenry, as well as their view of community affiliation significance. Pact is presenting its own data interpretation and inviting interested organizations and activists involved in local development for discussion. We will be happy to offer the detailed study results to all stakeholders. In its next publication, Pact will analyze the body of research data on citizens' participation in addressing local issues and their perspective of their role within the local development processes.

Conclusions

- To a considerable share of Belarusians, **the concept “local community” is vague and nonfunctional** and community affiliation is neither obvious nor important. Only 1/4 of respondents who managed to define local community described it in terms of an “opportunity to resolve shared issues.” Even fewer respondents saw community membership as a “contribution to civil society and democracy development” and an “opportunity to be heard by authorities.” This may be a testament to the rather low capacity of a large part of Belarusian society to self-organize and interact on the local level both for satisfying personal interests and tackling common tasks. The impression is that the philosophies of “I am not my brother's keeper” and “shared means nobody's” remain relevant for many Belarusians. Initiatives aiming to foster the feeling of ownership (“shared means mine”) and personal responsibility for quality of life among the citizenry may be the tool to encourage more active public engagement in advancing communities and their self-organization.
- The presence of an organized and motivated local force may help to overcome low self-organization capacity among the citizens. However, **95% of respondents failed to name a local leader** – be it a representative of an NGO, local governance body, business, church, or other institute. Among other factors, this may be caused by the immaturity of civil society on the local level and the vertical arrangement of state power, which creates a feeling that “everything is decided in high-up places”.
- The absence of recognizable local-level leaders may also be indicative of a “gap” between state and civil society institutes and ordinary citizens. From the citizens' perspective, those who should be fulfilling leadership functions due to the scope or mission of their organizations either fail to execute them properly or lack leadership competencies necessary for people to trust them. In particular, **representatives of public organizations and initiatives should pay attention** to the fact that in the eyes of ordinary citizens it is more important

for leaders to be officially employed, possess real experience in addressing local issues, and have personal contacts with community residents than be skillful in dealing with foreign donors.

- The larger the settlement where a particular respondent lives, the narrower his or her view of the local community. Personal affiliation with a community and its significance **are least characteristic of Minsk residents**. Thus, the share of minskers who appreciate their membership in this urban community does not even reach 8% – 2/3 of capital dwellers have no experience interacting with their neighbors. The majority of them see the community as a bunch of apartments in a residential building, a residential building yard, or an urban district. These perceptions should be taken into account by initiatives targeting the formation of urban values and spaces and/or behavioral models. Such common urban tasks may run into obstacles due to a narrow understanding of communities and a lack of community interaction experience among a considerable part of Minsk and other large cities’ residents.
- **Women and senior citizens** turned out to be **the most motivated** groups within Belarusian society to take local-level actions. These are the citizens to rely on (and build communications with) while planning community development efforts. Meanwhile, it is necessary to render attention to **education, motivation, and engagement of youth** in such initiatives, as community affiliation is more important for citizens from ages 18 to 29 than for other age groups.
- There is a direct interrelation between citizens’ perception of community, significance of community affiliation, and the degree of citizens’ activeness on the local level proceeding from public interests and commitment. Thus, community development programs and interventions should focus on the **educational and communicative components** of public work. The stronger the feeling of community membership among the citizenry and the better they understand the importance of efforts to address shared issues and satisfy shared interests, the stronger their motivation and engagement in local-level activities aimed at improving their quality of life will be.

Key findings

The concept of “local community” is neither self-evident nor alien for Belarusians. 38.6% of respondents failed to independently describe the concept of “local community,” despite the fact that nearly 85% of them resided in their communities for over 10 years. The majority of the remaining 60% of respondents who attempted to define “community” mainly perceived it as an association of people sharing a territory (residents of a city/village or neighbors sharing a district/street/residential stairwell/building). Simultaneously, only 15.2% considered the existence of common interests and the joint resolution of common issues important (see, Fig. 1.)

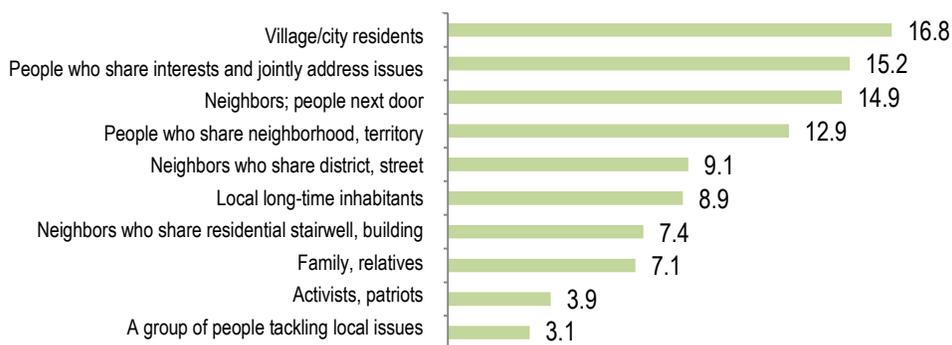


Fig. 1. How would you define “local community”? (B %, N=610)

For reference:

- Sviat Murunov, urbanist: **Local communities** – communities based on places of residence. It starts with one’s house; their yard, street, block, and district community. Local communities emerge only if more than 50% of people know each other, experience regular self-organized and joint activities, and there is an opportunity to delegate.
- V.I. Patrushev, Russian sociologist: **Local community** – a place of residence of a group of people with similar characteristics or shared interests that unite them. Communities are distinguished by social relations based on close personal contacts and duration.

The value of community affiliation is perceived by citizens ambiguously. Out of those who managed to define “local community,” nearly half (45.6%) of them unambiguously declared their membership in a respective community. Another 36.5% of respondents stated their affiliation with their community rather than dis-affiliation.

Only 18.3% of Minsk residents unconditionally perceived themselves as community members. In other cities, this indicator amounted to 43.8%, and in rural areas – 33.8%.

59.3% of respondents who managed to give a definition of “local community” considered community affiliation important. For 37.5%, belonging to a community was not significant. The feeling of community membership was more important for women than for men. Thus, 20.5% of female respondents noted that being a member of local community was “very important” and 44.3% said it was “rather important” for them. Among men these indicators were 14.4% and 38.6%, respectively.

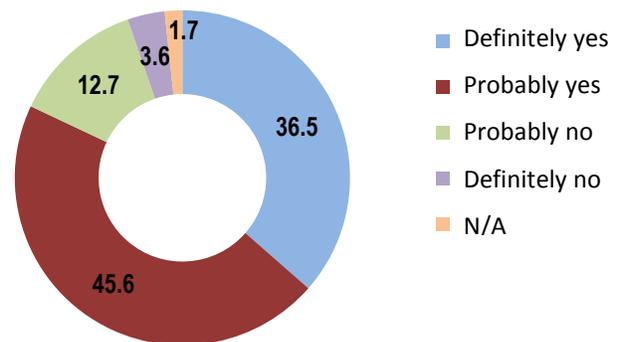


Fig. 2. Do you consider yourself a member of the community you just described? (B %, N=610)

Local residents know each other but interact poorly.

Over 90% of Belarusians claimed that they were familiar with many of their neighbors in their residential building/settlement or on their street. At the same time, only 43.2% of respondents claimed to engage in some activity with their neighbors (Fig. 3.). More than half of the respondents (60.0%) specified that the main reason for their participation in joint events was their concern for what was happening in/on their building, street, or yard. Another 33% explained it as infringement upon their personal interests.

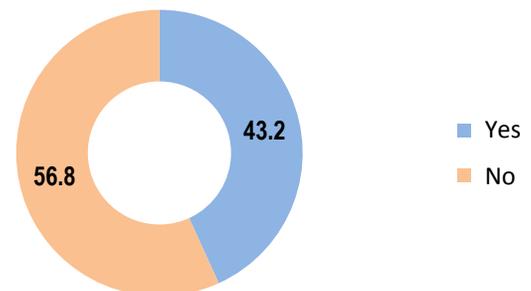


Fig. 3. Have you done or do you do anything jointly with your neighbors? (B %, N=997)

Belarusians do not know their local community leaders. The vast majority of Belarusians (95.3%) could not name the leader of the community with which they associated themselves. Nonetheless, the respondents confidently identified key qualities that a local community leader should possess. Real experience in resolving local issues, contacts with authorities, popularity among the population, and acquaintance with community members were among the “top 5”

features of a community leader. His/her official employment (17.7%) was stated as much more important than contacts with foreign donors (6%).

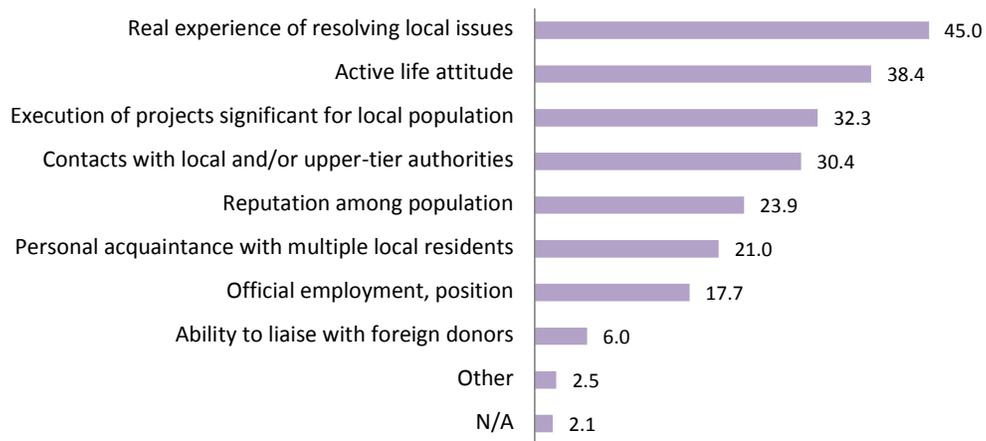


Fig.4. What qualities and competencies should a person aspiring to be a local community leader possess in order for you to trust him/her? (B %, N=610)

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