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Sociology of protests in Belarus and international assistance

Policy Brief | June 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sociology of protests in Belarus and international assistance

The Policy Brief relies on the findings of the sociological surveys conducted by Belarusian and international organizations.

The Policy Brief analyzes long-term trends and short-term triggers for the socio-political mobilization in Belarus in 2020-2021, describes the social profile of the new protest movement, and characterizes the current protest trends.

Based on the sociological findings, the international community is advised to:

- support research on Belarus within the country and abroad
- assist the newly built pro-democratic structures through capacity building and networking
- support non-state and social media
- respect the decentralized nature of the new protest movement
- stimulate cooperation between civil society and businesses
- promote a positive agenda of democratic transformation in the Belarusian society

SOCIOLOGICAL DATA

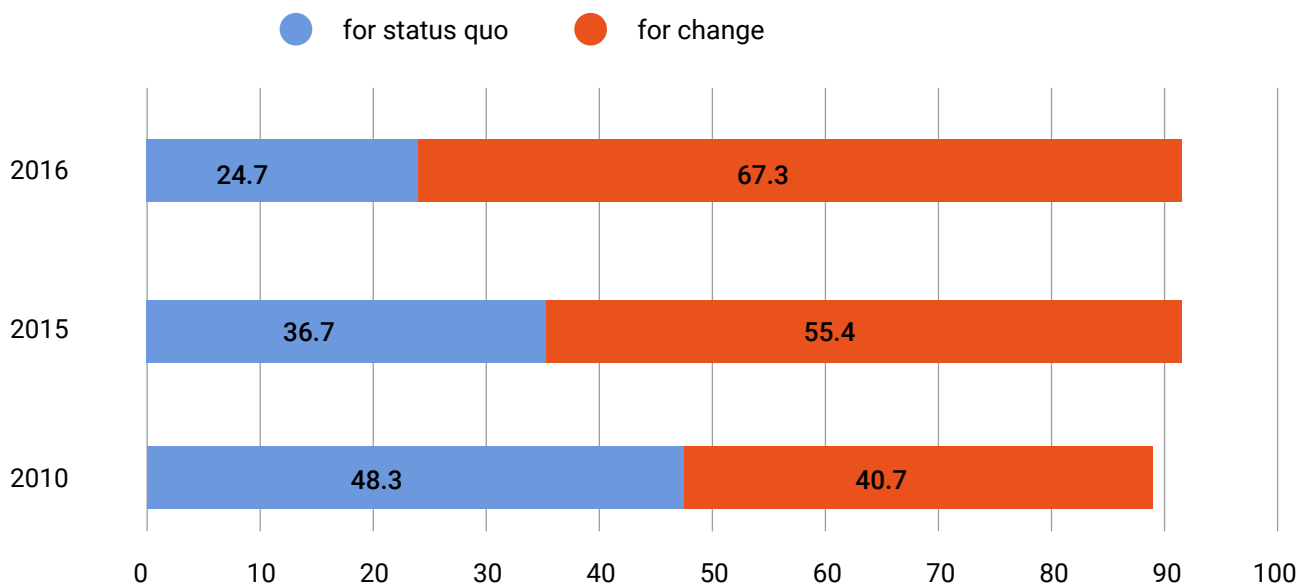
Long-Term Mobilization Factors

The political crisis of 2020, socio-political mobilization processes and mass protests, which started after 9 August 2020, still maintain their revolutionary motivation towards a radical change in the power and governance system in Belarus. The principal long-term factor of the Belarusian revolution is the desynchronization, or rather misalignment, of development agendas of the Belarusian society and the political regime, as well as the **accumulated demand for socio-political transformations**, which has been growing at least over the past decade after the presidential elections of 2010.

Since 2010 until 2016, the share of Belarusians standing for “keeping the existing status quo” (i.e. “stability,” the main buzz word of the Belarusian authoritarianism) had shrunk twofold, while the share of those speaking for change had grown to 65-70% (figure 1). ▼

▶ Figure 1

What is more important to you now: To keep the existing status quo in the country or to change it?¹



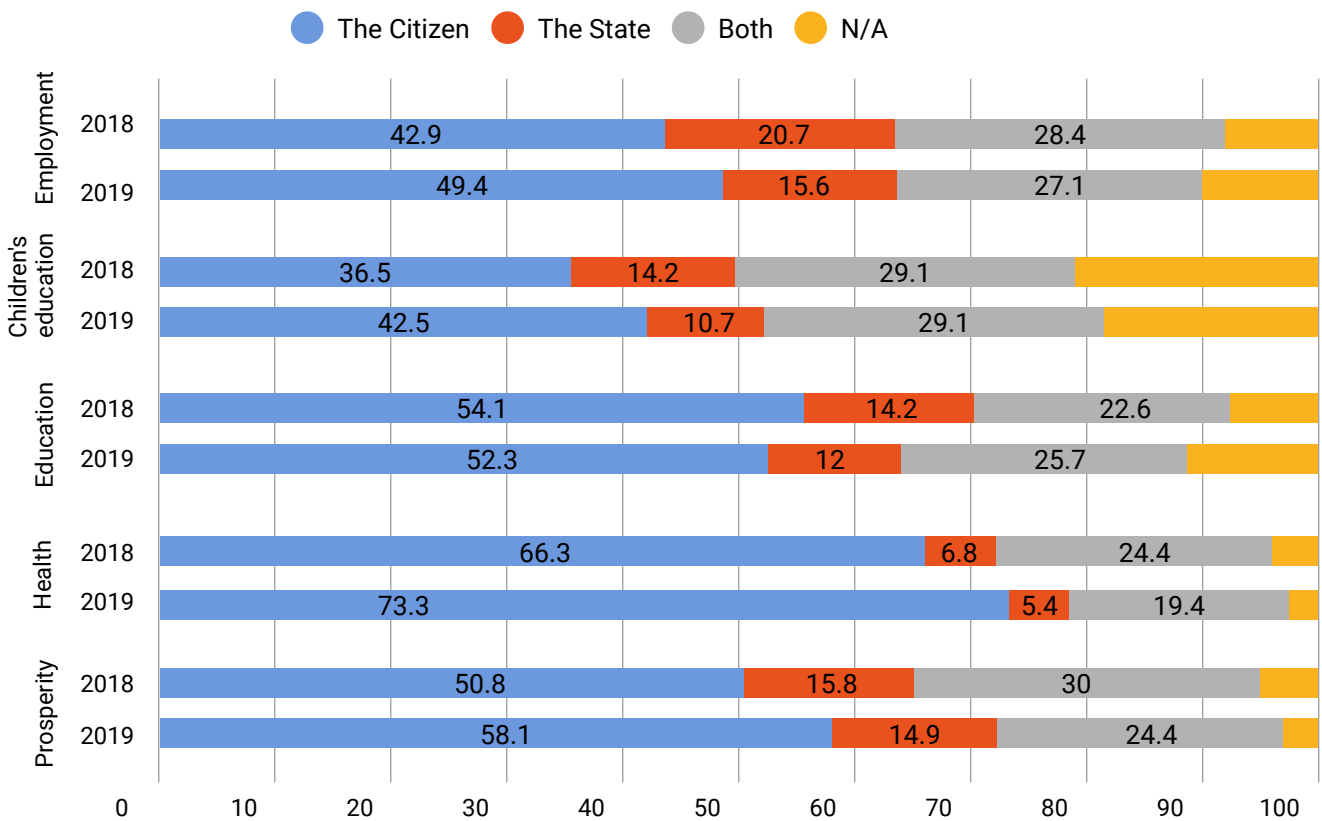
¹ IISEPS surveys 2010, 2015, 2016: <http://www.iiseps.org/?page_id=1349&lang=en> (accessed 15 June, 2021).

By 2020, sociologists have noted a significant reduction in the paternalistic sentiments. The surveys of 2018-2019 demonstrate that the ever growing share of Belarusian citizens are now relying more on themselves and less on the state as regards their own health, prosperity, and education (figure 2) ▼ .

Under the influence of global technological development processes, growing mobility and accessibility of information, the Belarusian society has started to introduce new standards and quality of life, promote innovational economy, develop private businesses, establish new social groups (e.g. IT specialists, creative business people, designers, multimedia engineers), drastically expand the numbers and modify the profile of self-employed entrepreneurs.

► Figure 2

The State vs. The Citizen: Who is more instrumental in shaping up different aspects of life?²



At first the state governance system did not facilitate and then increasingly impeded the development of any private initiative. The Belarusian society gradually started to generate demand for changes, which either could not be adequate-

² Artyom Shraibman, „Что думают белорусы? Белорусы не верят, что могут повлиять на государство” [What do Belarusians Think? Belarusians do not Believe They Can Affect the State], 14 January, 2020: <<https://thinktanks.by/project/2020/01/14/belorusy-ne-veryat-chto-mogut-povliyat-na-gosudarstvo-i-vse-menshe-polagayutsya-na-nego.html>> (accessed 15 June, 2021).

ly embraced by the state governance system because of the lacking feedback mechanism, or could not be satisfied due to the nature of the political regime.

Principal Mobilization Triggers

Nontransparent negotiations about deeper integration with Russia in 2019

The nontransparent negotiations on signing the mysterious “roadmaps” with Russia, which could allegedly lead to the loss of a significant part of the Belarusian sovereignty, gave rise in 2019 to growing tensions amongst such important social groups as private businesses and innovative sectors of economy that were emulating the western world and its standards. Sociological surveys showed a significant slump in pro-Russian sentiments. According to the polls, in the course of 2019 the share of people ready to support a union with Russia (if given a hard choice: either unification with Russia or accession to the EU) has dropped from 60.4% to 40.4%³. Anyway these trends led to no mass protests.

Belarusian authorities and society responding differently to the COVID-19 pandemic

The administrative system, especially at its top levels, has demonstrated an inadequate reaction to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country: authorities’ counteractions were lacking coordination, were poorly timed, not relying on any feedback from the citizenry. This has caused a negative social backlash. According to the survey conducted in July 2020, two thirds of respondents assessed the reaction of Belarusian authorities to the COVID-19 outbreak as “inadequate.” Such negative assessments accompanied the deteriorating trust in some government structures and state-run mass media⁴.

On the other hand, the all-out popular mobilization during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic started a qualitative change of the Belarusian civil society, and the political mobilization followed in its wake. In many ways, the shapes and forms of the ensuing political mobilization, technologies of self-organization, scale-up of activities, etc., were simply walking in the steps of the popular movement, which had fought against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic⁵.

³ “Обвальное падение: число сторонников союза с Россией снизилось на треть” [A Dramatic Drop: The Number of Supporters of Unification with Russia Has Shrunk by One Third], 5 February, 2020: <<https://belsat.eu/ru/news/obvalnoe-padenie-chislo-storonnikov-soyuza-s-rossiej-snizilos-na-tret/>> (accessed 15 June, 2021).

⁴ Oksana Shelest, “Беларусское общество в ситуации эпидемии COVID-19: реакция на кризис” [Belarusian Society in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Reaction on the Crisis], 24 October, 2020: <<https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2020/10/24/belaruskoe-obschestvo-v-situatsii-epidemii-covid-19-reaktsiya.html>> (accessed 15 June, 2021).

⁵ Andrei Egorov, Oksana Shelest, “Беларусь в ситуации эпидемии COVID-19: характер реакции на проблему государства и общества” [Belarus in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Different Responses by the State and the Society], 20 December, 2020: <<https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2020/12/20/belarus-v-situatsii-epidemii-covid-19-harakter-reaktsii-na.html>> (accessed 15 June, 2021).

Police brutalities during the postelection crackdown on 9-12 August 2020

The level of police brutality, unprecedented for the modern history of Belarus, has led to an explosion of mass protests. The online opinion poll in September 2020 showed that 98% of respondents mentioned police brutality and repressions as one of the drivers motivating them to take part in street actions⁶. At the same time, according to the interviews, for a large part of protesters it was only one of the contributing factors. From the very beginning, the main demands of protesters, aside from putting a stop to violence, were new elections and a political reform⁷.

Social Profile of the Protest Movement

It has become evident that the protest movement includes **representatives of all generations, different sectors of economy, different professional communities and social strata**. The 2020 election campaign has led to a unique merging of “the three worlds.”⁸ “The first world” is represented by owners of innovative technologies who tend to identify themselves in a rather global context (rarely taking part in any internal political processes); “the second world” are the people with a national scope of self-determination; and “the third world” individuals focusing more on their local and private interests. Representatives of each one of those “worlds” had their reasons to show discontent with the Belarusian regime, but only a unique conjunction of circumstances could bring all three of them together⁹.

This alliance lent the Belarusian revolution such characteristics as technological sophistication and supreme solidarity, whereas the shared demands remained the same: democratic changes and restoration of law and justice (release of political prisoners, prosecution of people responsible for police brutality and repressions). Moreover the protest movement has never had nor does it have now any geopolitical dimension, or any articulated “positive agenda,” which would clearly describe future reforms. Even now the **Belarusian revolution remains purely democratic with its main demand to reclaim the freedom to determine the future**.

⁶ Lesia Rudnik, “Сацыялогія беларускага пратэсту: чаму і дзея чаро беларусы выходзяць на вуліцы?” [Sociology of the Belarusian Protest: Why Do Belarusians Take to the Streets?], 17 September, 2020: <<https://newbelarus.vision/onukh-summary/>> (accessed 16 June, 2021).

⁷ Oksana Shelest, “Голос улицы”: социологические наблюдения” [“Voices of the Streets”: Sociological Observations], 26 August, 2020: <<http://fly-uni.org/prastora/golos-ulicy-sociologicheskie-nabljudeniya/>> (accessed 16 June, 2021).

⁸ Vladimir Matskevich, “Глобальное потепление после холодной войны” [Global Warming After the Cold War], 16 November, 2017: <<https://fly-uni.org/stati/globalnoe-poteplenie-posle-holodnoj-voyny/>> (accessed 16 June, 2021).

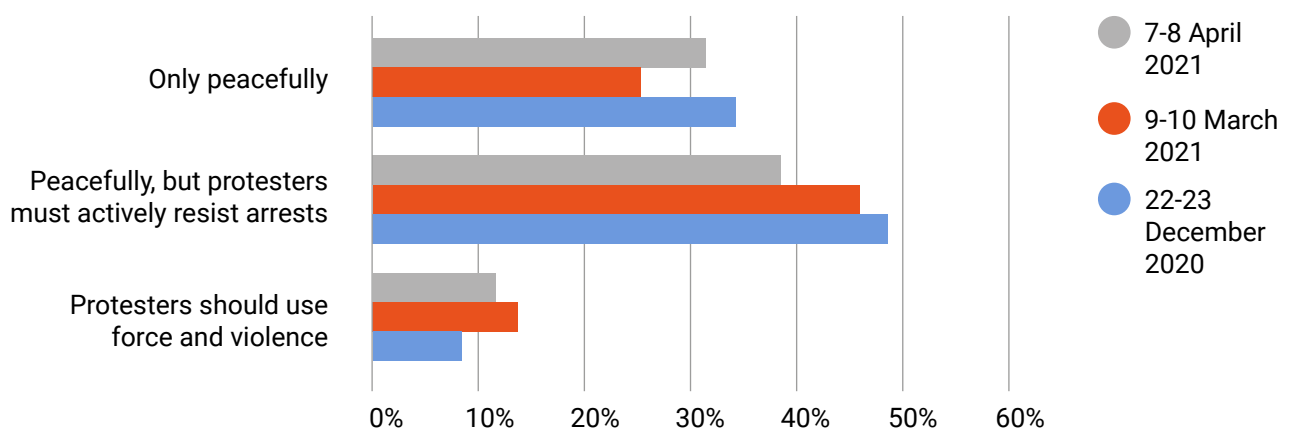
⁹ Oksana Shelest, „Revolution in Belarus – Faktoren und Werteorientierungen” [Revolution in Belarus – Factors and Value Orientations], Belarus-Analysen, 21 December, 2020: <<https://www.laender-analysen.de/belarus-analysen/53/revolution-in-belarus-faktoren-und-werteorientierungen/>> (accessed 16 June, 2021).

Current Situation

As of May-June 2021, Belarus remains **under the opposing forces of pressure**. On the one hand, the Lukashenko regime, which had initially opted for a strategy of brutal crackdown against any protest sentiments, continues to act within its framework. The level of political repressions remains to be high. Aside from the suppression of street protests, the authorities routinely “weed out” and lay off disloyal employees of state-run companies and organizations, and continue to put pressure on strike committees, independent trade unions, independent media, NGOs, political parties, and private businesses. By 29 June 2021, Belarus had **520 political prisoners** and over **3,000 politically motivated criminal cases**. The Belarusian regime is now gradually moving away from individualized repressions towards **reprisals against infrastructural elements of the civil society**: there are plans to start a reregistration cycle for NGOs, urban recreational zones are being shut down, research centers and think tanks suffer from the ever mounting pressure.

On the other hand, the protesting part of the Belarusian society continues to follow the logic of largely **nonviolent resistance**. According to the sociological data, although the share of protesters advocating the use of force and violence has somewhat grown recently, it still is an absolute minority (figure 3).

▶ Figure 3 **How, in your opinion, should the street protest proceed? (dynamics)¹⁰**



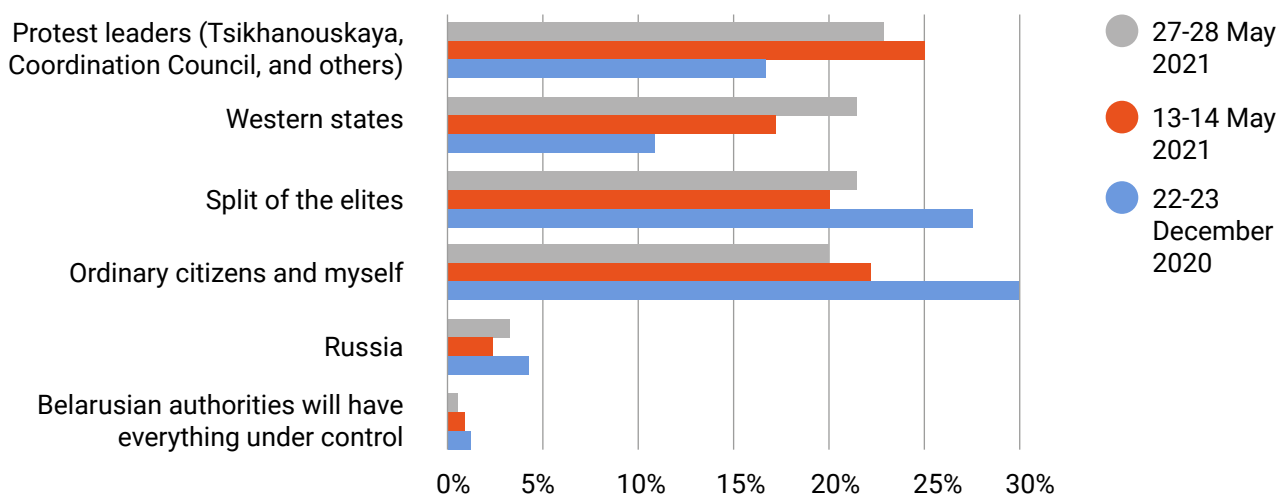
¹⁰ Narodny Opros (National Poll). Dynamics of Protests: <<https://narodny-opros.net/#monitoring>> (accessed 16 June, 2021).

The protest movement in Belarus is highly **decentralized and self-organized**. Methods and forms of nonviolent resistance are versatile: street actions, hoisting of flags, graffiti, stickers, murals, international solidarity campaigns, dissemination of information, economic pressure (nonpayment of utility bills, complete withdrawal of personal bank deposits, boycotting some companies' products, etc.), conscientious resignation from state-owned companies and organizations, solidarity actions, letters and care packages mailed to political prisoners, money transfers to victims of the reprisals and their family members.

This resistance becomes a backdrop for the continuously **developing political and civic culture of the society**. We see for example how the local “urban neighborhood” communities born in 2020 continue to evolve, although under the brunt of repressions this process now is less pronounced.

Simultaneously, the protesting part of Belarusian society starts showing a **stronger demand for political leadership** (figure 4) ▼. Yet there is still no one who would adequately meet the criteria. There were several attempts to play such a role in different shapes and forms (Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is still viewed by a significant part of protesting community as the national leader; Coordination Council, National Anti-Crisis Management, SKHOD Initiative, organizing committee of Viktor Babaryka's party VMESTE, etc.), but none of these protoactors can offer a joint strategy capable of changing the stalemate situation, nor do they have sufficient resources to organize effective actions within the country. Under such circumstances, despite the still existing protest potential, the new spiral of socio-political mobilization in Belarus remains to be unpredictable.

► Figure 4 **What do you hope for most of all in resolving the current political situation in Belarus? (dynamics)¹¹**



¹¹ Narodny Opros (National Poll). Dynamics of Protests: <<https://narodny-opros.net/#monitoring>> (accessed 16 June, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Lack of Data: Support Research on Belarus

Political events in Belarus in 2020 and 2021 revealed a significant lack of in-depth studies on Belarusian society and politics. This is partly due to the government's restrictions on sociological and other types of research in Belarus, but also to the general decline of interest in social and political studies of Belarus domestically and abroad. To understand and predict important political and social developments in Belarus, it is necessary to revitalize and promote research on Belarusian politics and society by increasing availability of funds and capacity-building programs for researchers and analysts in Belarus and abroad.

Decentralized Movement: Promote Capacity Building and Networking

Political mobilization in 2020 attracted many newcomers in the social and political life of Belarus. Almost all newly formed political and public initiatives consist of people with very little if any experience in political participation, community work, or running an NGO. Such structures operate mostly in a decentralized manner – partly due to the systemic pressure on the opposition throughout the entire reign of Alexander Lukashenko, partly as a result of large-scale repressions in 2020 and 2021. This creates coordination and collaboration problems, but makes them less vulnerable to reprisals.

Consequently there is a need for capacity building and training programs for new activists, as well as for partnership networking between new grass-roots civil society initiatives in Belarus and other European countries. Any collaboration with civil society and pro-democratic politicians in Belarus should take into consideration the horizontal nature of coordination between different actors, and not insist on creating a single decision-making center.

Lack of Unbiased Information: Support Non-State Media / Social Media

Against the background of the current confrontation between society and the authoritarian government, it is important to ensure a free circulation of unbiased information. State repressions have already resulted in a closure of the most popular and biggest independent online media in Belarus TUT.BY. Sociological data show an increase in the level of trust towards independent media among people of Belarus in the last years. To keep this trend alive, support is required for the remaining independent media in Belarus, newly emerged local information initiatives and networks, including social media, as well as international media services with a broad popular outreach in Belarus.

Demand for Long-Term Changes: Support Cooperation Between Civil Society and Businesses

Political developments in Belarus in 2020-2021 are the result of long-term transformation processes in society. Over the past ten years, the number of people who rely on themselves rather than on the state when solving social and political problems has grown significantly. Demands for democratic reforms of the existing political model also increased. These demands are long-term and enjoy a broad social support, with private businesses and civil society “in the forefront.” They are not likely to go away even if repressive actions of the authorities continue for a long time and block “top-down” transformation processes. Therefore there is a need to promote transfer of knowledge about good practices of cooperation between civil society and businesses on social and political issues without participation of the state.

Demand for Democracy: Promote Positive Agenda for Democratic Transformation

Currently the demand for democratic reforms in the Belarusian society is high, although many Belarusians do not believe that true democracy for Belarus is achievable in a short-term future. Probably such views are caused by the unprecedented wave of repressions and by the 27-year-long experience of living in autocratic Belarus. Therefore it is important not only to stimulate democratic activity, but also to inform people about successful examples of democratic transitions in other countries and about development mechanisms of self-government and democratic political culture.

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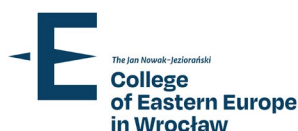
About the project

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