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ZOIS REPORT

**YOUTH IN BELARUS:
OUTLOOK ON LIFE AND
POLITICAL ATTITUDES**

Félix Krawatzek

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Executive summary

Belarus is approaching a cycle of elections that promise to be more relevant in the long term than the predictable votes of the past. There is potential for significant shifts in the country because the Belarusian leadership disagrees over further integration with Moscow, and after twenty-five years of rule by president Alexander Lukashenko, there is speculation about an impending change of power.

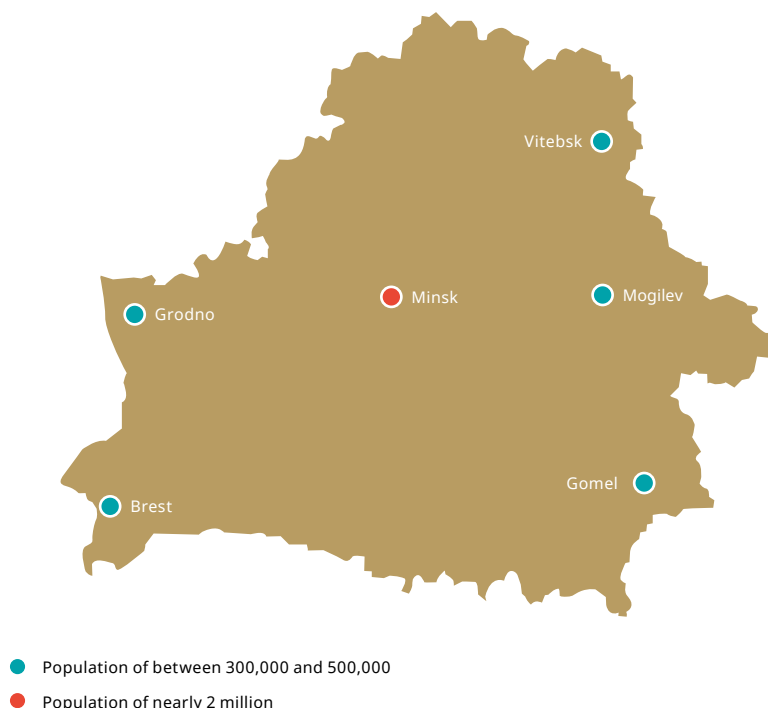
In February 2019, ZOiS conducted a survey that provides rare insights into the political attitudes of Belarusians aged between 16 and 34, their political engagement, and their views on and experiences with other countries in the run-up to the parliamentary vote on 17 November 2019 and the presidential election due by August 2020 at the latest.

The main findings are as follows:

- Nearly 40 per cent of young Belarusians are interested in politics; 50 per cent want to participate in the parliamentary election this autumn, and 70 per cent want to take part in the presidential election next year.
- Half of young people in Belarus know about protests in their country, and of those, 3 per cent participated in a protest in the last twelve months.

- Trust in political and public institutions varies considerably: among the younger generation, trust in the media and the parliament is particularly low; the president and the church receive mixed scores; and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), the army, and the police are the most trusted institutions.
- Two-thirds of young Belarusians self-identify as Russian Orthodox, but more than 80 per cent attend church only on important religious holidays, if at all.
- One-third of young people in Belarus would like to speak more Belarusian in public; 40 per cent would not, and another 25 per cent do not care either way. For most young Belarusians, the issue of language is not salient for their country's further development. Russian remains by far the commonest spontaneously spoken language.
- Online sources are the main tool for young people to obtain political information, with VKontakte (VK.com) being the most prominent outlet. YouTube is also frequently consulted, as is the independent news portal TUT.BY. Alongside these outlets, young Belarusians continue to consult state-controlled conventional media, often as a second source of information.
- More than 50 per cent of young Belarusians think that things have deteriorated over the last decade. Less than 20 per cent believe that the situation has improved.
- Expectations of the government centre on economic issues. Only around 10 per cent of people mention political priorities such as ensuring equal opportunities.
- With regard to the country's foreign policy, more than one-third of young people prioritise a closer relationship with Russia. Slightly less than one-third say Belarus should have closer relations with other European countries, most prominently Poland and Germany.
- Forty per cent of young Belarusians see closer relations with the European Union (EU) even at the expense of harming relations with Russia as desirable. Less than 25 per cent wish for a union with Russia.
- Belarusians have extensive travel and work experiences in other regions of Belarus; but international mobility remains limited to half of young people. International mobility, including for work and travel, centres on EU countries, Russia, and Ukraine.
- A clear majority of young Belarusians are contemplating migration: two-thirds would like to leave their place of residence. EU countries are the most desired destinations, favoured by 38 per cent, while Russia and the United States (US) are preferred by slightly more than 10 per cent each.

FIGURE 1
Cities included in the survey



Source: ZOiS

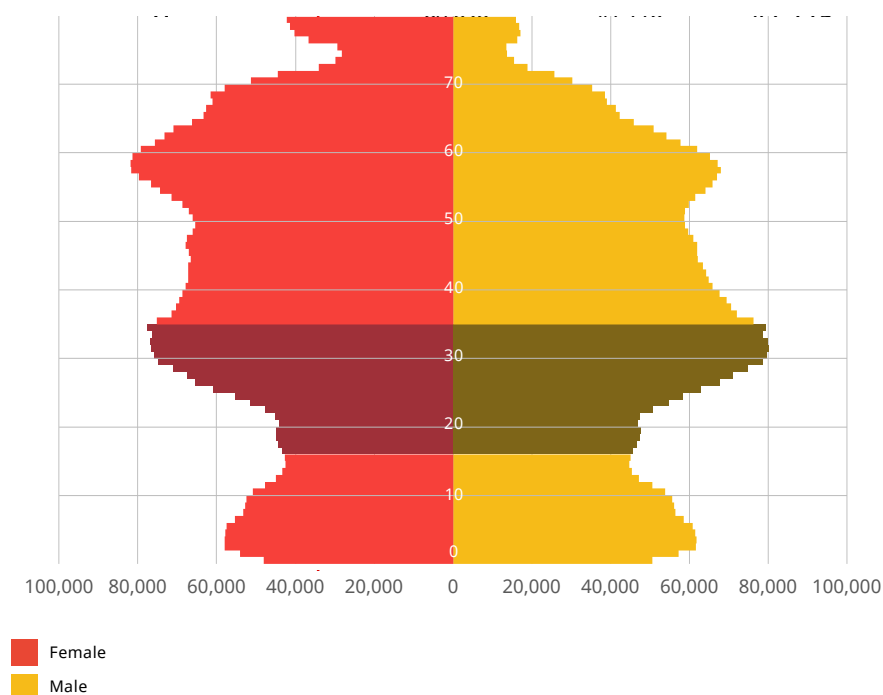
Introduction

It is notoriously difficult to gain reliable information about Belarusian society and politics. The political and academic debate therefore confronts fundamental problems when attempts are made to analyse the country's political and social tendencies. The ZOiS survey conducted in February 2019 provides novel insights into the political attitudes of young Belarusians, their political engagement, and their views on and experiences with other countries.

The survey comes at a potentially critical moment in the country's development. Belarus is approaching a cycle of elections, with a parliamentary vote on 17 November 2019 and the next presidential election due by August 2020 at the latest. These upcoming elections should send important signals about the country's future. This is particularly so because the Belarusian leadership disagrees over further integration with Moscow, and after twenty-five years of Lukashenko's rule, there is speculation about a change of power. Such a profound change will happen neither in the very near future nor as a direct response to the elections, but the political system and society are evolving, and it is in this context that the elections matter, as do the views of young people.

As far as relations with Moscow are concerned, the implications of the 1999 Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus have become unclear. The treaty foresaw deep integration between the two countries, but currently there is primarily an immigration and customs union, with

FIGURE 2
Population by sex and age in 2018



discussions limited to potential harmonisation of markets and laws. The Russian side seems ready to move on, whereas Lukashenko has repeatedly resisted attempts at further integration. This distance comes despite mounting economic pressure from increased oil prices and restrictions on Belarusian agricultural exports.

What do young Belarusians think politically, and what do they make of their country's political situation? This survey was carried out in cooperation with R-Research between 15 and 27 February 2019 among 2,000 respondents across Belarus.¹ We surveyed people aged 16–34 living in the country's major urban areas. Respondents came from Minsk, with a population of nearly 2 million, as well as the regional hubs of Brest, Gomel, Grodno, Mogilev, and Vitebsk, each with a population of between 300,000 and 500,000.²

► **FIGURE 1** In addition to quotas for place of residence, we fixed quotas for gender and age, to mirror Belarus's official demographic structure. Overall, Belarusians in the age cohort surveyed here represent a little more than 2.3 million people, out of a total population of 9.5 million. ► **FIGURE 2**

The survey was conducted online, a format that was chosen as it fits the communication practices of the younger generation, gives respondents control

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the research assistance provided by Ana Karalashvili.

² For the purpose of readability, and following general academic practice, this report uses the transliteration from the Russian spellings of Belarusian names.

over the process, conveys greater anonymity than face-to-face interviews, and thereby limits social desirability bias — the psychological tendency of interviewees to adjust to the interviewers' real or perceived expectations.

Living conditions, education, and income

Asked about their professional activities in the week before the survey, 56 per cent of respondents indicated that they were working full time. Eighteen per cent of those questioned were studying and 14 per cent said they looked after their family. ► **FIGURE 3** Three per cent stated that they were unemployed. The official unemployment rate of Belarus is 0.3 per cent,³ a number that includes only those who have decided to register as unemployed in a context of low unemployment benefits. Data from the World Bank, by contrast, indicate that youth unemployment (among those aged 15–24) is nearing 10 per cent⁴ and overall unemployment is slightly below 6 per cent.⁵ Unemployment was higher among female respondents and those with children.

The young people surveyed were predominantly married or single, and only around 10 per cent were cohabiting, reflecting the country's traditional household structure. Older respondents, those with children, and women were more likely to live with a partner. Around 40 per cent of the sample had children, primarily people older than 25 and those who self-identified as religious. Respondents with children also tended to have a lower level of education.

Forty-four per cent of the sample had completed university education, and around 40 per cent had finished secondary education. The better educated were more likely to live in Minsk, more likely to be female, and less likely to have children.

Twenty-eight per cent of the young people described the material position of their household as one in which they could afford household appliances but not, for instance, a car. A little more than 40 per cent stated they had enough money for clothing and shoes but not enough to buy a large household appliance. On a seven-point scale of economic self-perception, with one being the lowest value, the average was 3.91. ► **FIGURE 4** Perceptions of household income are primarily linked to place of residence: respondents living in Minsk were significantly more likely to report higher income levels.

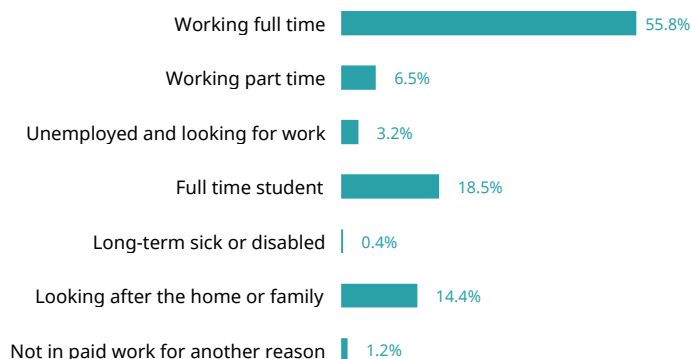
For context, Belarus experienced a period of economic growth after the late 1990s, accompanied however by huge rates of inflation; the country then entered a period of recession in 2015–16. After 2017, the situation stabilised

3 'Uroven' ofitsial'no zaregistrovannoi bezrobotitsy na konets perioda', Natsional'nyi statisticheskii komitet Respubliki Belarus', accessed 8 October 2019, <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/Indicators/Preview?key=153139>.

4 'Youth Unemployment Rate for Belarus', Economic Research, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 3 May 2019, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SLUEM1524ZSBLR>.

5 'Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)', World Bank, April 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=BY>.

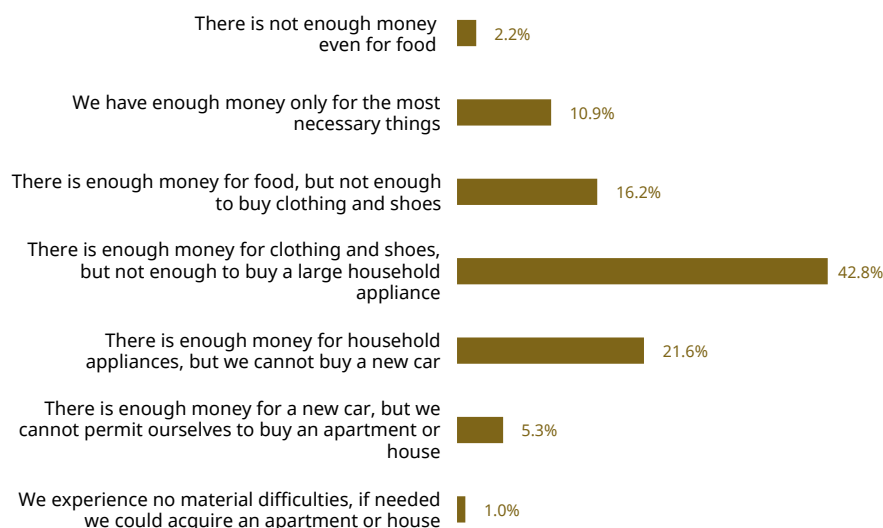
FIGURE 3
Employment status (as of last week)



n = 1,912

Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 4
Self-reported household wealth



n = 1,960

Source: ZOiS

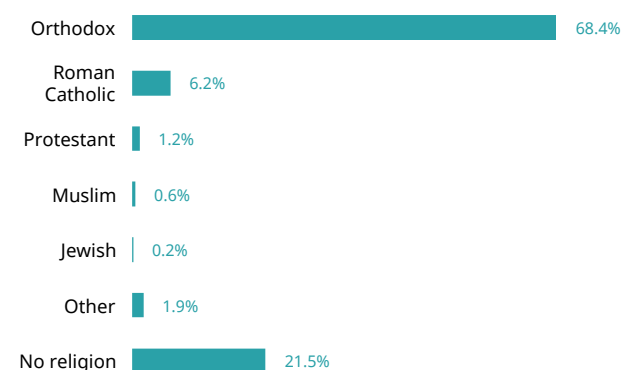
again and gross domestic product (GDP) grew at 2.5 per cent,⁶ leading to increased household consumption and a rise in real wages.⁷ Growth in the past has enabled a decline in the number of households below the poverty line, but inflation remains high, nearing 5 per cent in 2018.⁸

6 'GDP growth (annual %)', World Bank, accessed 12 September 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=BY>.

7 'Belarus Economic Update — Fall 2018', World Bank, 6 November 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/belarus/publication/economic-update-fall-2018>.

8 'Development of inflation rates in Belarus', WorldData, accessed 12 September 2019, <https://www.worlddata.info/europe/belarus/inflation-rates.php>.

FIGURE 5
Religious affiliation



n = 1,955

Source: ZOiS

Young people in Belarus self-identify as Russian Orthodox but rarely attend a place of worship.

Religion and language

After the significant destruction of church life during the Soviet period, Belarusians experienced religious liberalisation after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Traditionally, the territory of what is today Belarus has held an important bridging function between the Orthodox and the Catholic or Protestant regions of Europe. In the 1990s, smaller denominations, including evangelical groups, also regained visibility and began to cooperate on certain issues with the Orthodox and Catholic communities.

Two-thirds of the survey respondents indicated that they were Orthodox, 6 per cent said that they were Catholic, and 21 per cent said they followed no religion. ► **FIGURE 5** An important question is what the practical implications of that religious identity are. We therefore asked those respondents who declared a religious affiliation how frequently they visited their respective places of worship. The data show a clear tendency for young Belarusians to attend church only on the most important religious holidays (53 per cent) or almost never (32 per cent). Largely self-identifying as Orthodox, young people do not tend to follow religious practices on a regular basis.

For comparison, in a survey conducted in October 2018 by the Pew Research Center, 20 per cent of Belarusians overall indicated that religion was very important in their lives, a similar value to those recorded in Ukraine or Bulgaria. That survey also found that around one-third of Belarusians attend religious services at least monthly.⁹ In this regard, young people in Belarus are significantly less religious than the general population.

⁹ 'How religious is your country?', Pew Research Center, 5 December 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/how-religious-is-your-country/>.

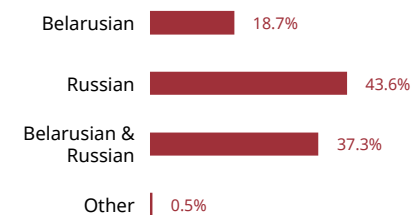
Our data showed no difference in religiosity by age or gender. However, those who worshipped more frequently were statistically more likely to have voted for Lukashenko in the 2015 presidential election.

One noteworthy aspect of recent changes in the relations between Belarus and Russia is the evolving role of the Belarusian language. In 2014, the Belarusian Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) argued that Belarusian had lost its importance as a sign of national identity and its use had been in steady decline throughout the post-Soviet period.¹⁰ However, Lukashenko now encourages intellectuals and writers to promote national culture and Belarusian historical values. Legally, both languages have equal status, although Belarusian has long been stigmatised — Lukashenko, for instance, first spoke Belarusian in public only in 2014.

This shift in cultural policy accelerated after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Since then, state officials have started to place an emphasis on medieval Belarusian history, which now figures prominently in political discourse. This emphasis seems to be gradually reflected in young people's perceptions of history. The state-controlled Institute of Sociology identified the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which existed from the thirteenth century to 1795, as the most interesting period of Belarusian history for young people.¹¹

Nevertheless, the use of the Belarusian language has declined significantly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In our survey, we asked what language(s) respondents considered to be their native language. Russian was the most frequent response, mentioned by 44 per cent of young Belarusians. Another 37 per cent stated that they considered both Belarusian and Russian to be their mother tongues, which is the country's official language policy. ► **FIGURE 6**

FIGURE 6
What language do you consider your native language?



n = 2,000

Source: ZOiS

We also enquired whether young people would like to speak more Belarusian. Although around one-third expressed such a desire, 40 per cent did not and another 25 per cent did not care either way. For most young Belarusians, language is therefore not an overly politicised issue that they see as a crucial component of their country's further development. This seems to confirm the attitude of society more broadly. When IISEPS asked the general population in 2015 which language(s) they would vote for as the country's official ones, 48 per cent responded with Russian and Belarusian, 21 per cent did not care, and only 14 per cent mentioned Belarusian alone.¹²

A further important dimension to language is to understand when people are most likely to speak what language. There might be important differences between the symbolic category of mother tongue and the language actually spoken.

For most young Belarusians, language is not an overly politicised issue.

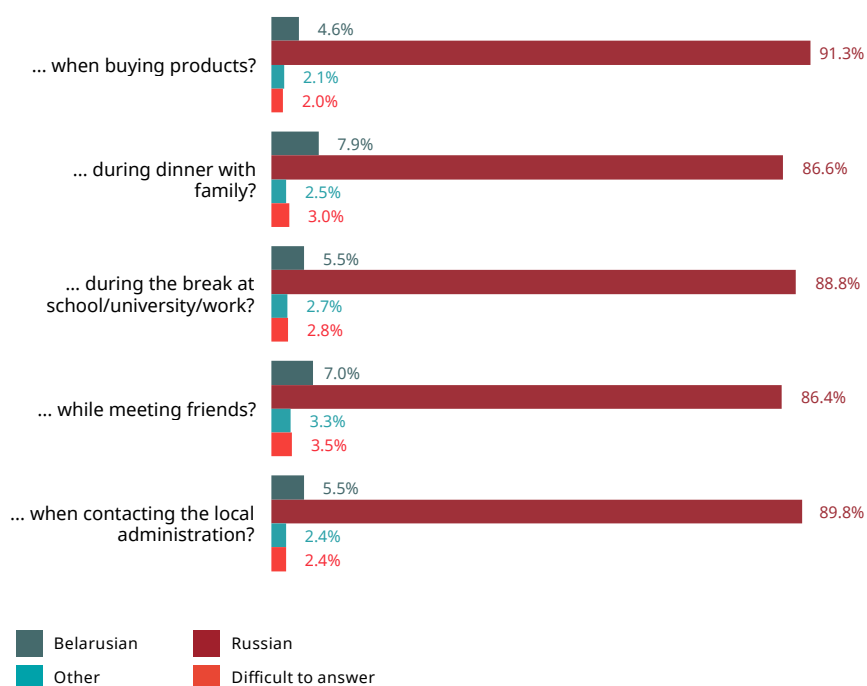
10 'Language and national identity', Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, accessed 12 September 2019, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=869>.

11 'Samoi interesnoi epokhoi v istorii Belarusi molodezh' nazyvaet period VKL', Institut Sotsiologii, 11 October 2018, <https://socio.bas-net.by/samoj-interesnoj-epohoj-v-istorii-belarusimolodezh-nazyvaet-period-vkl/>.

12 'Language and national identity', Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, accessed 12 September 2019, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=869>.

FIGURE 7

What language would you spontaneously speak ...



n = 1,989

Source: ZOiS

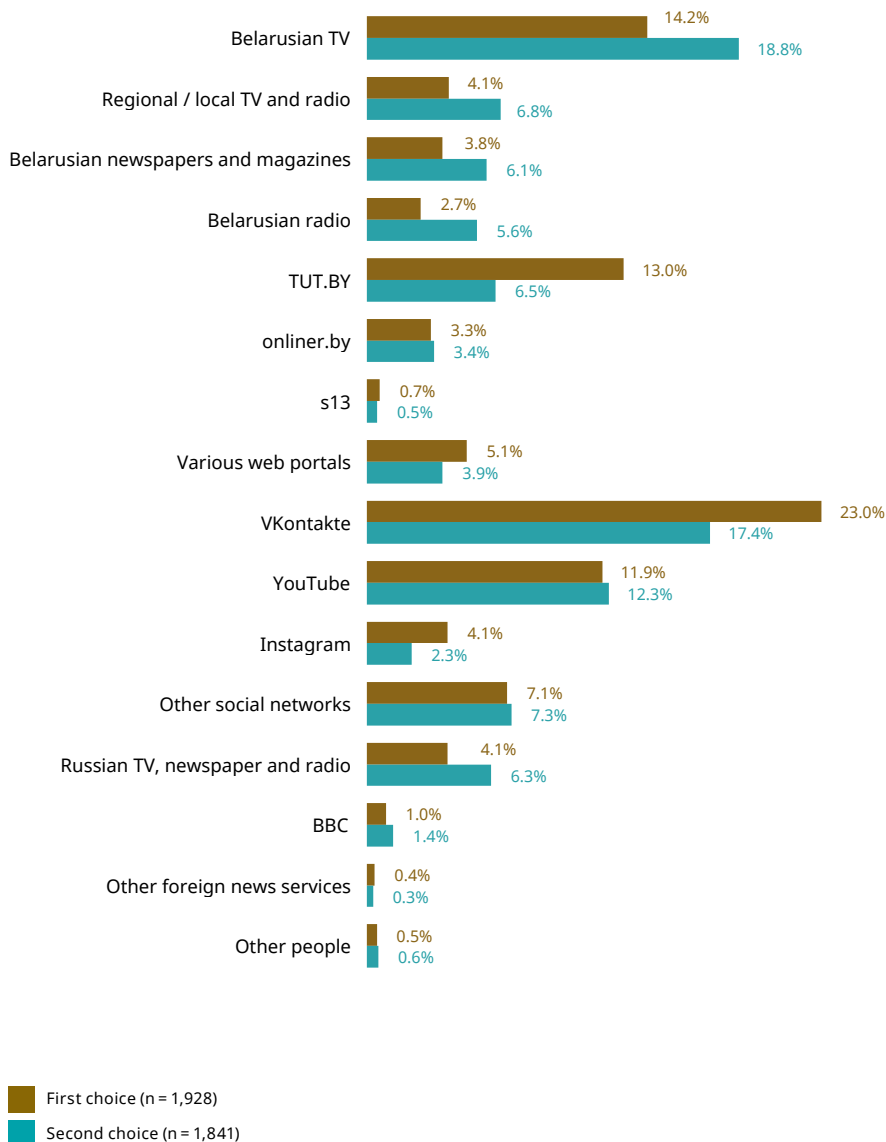
We therefore asked what language young people would spontaneously speak in a number of different situations. ► **FIGURE 7** By far, Russian remains the prevailing language in private and public interactions, used spontaneously by around 90 per cent of young people in public situations. Belarusian is slightly more frequently used in private interactions, such as family dinners or meetings with friends.

Learning about politics and the world

Belarusians confront considerable obstacles in accessing information about their country or international affairs. Over the last two years, authorities have begun to exercise firmer control over online media, complementing the restrictive environment and administrative burdens that limit conventional media outlets.¹³ The government continues to block opposition web pages and regularly fines journalists and bloggers who breach

13 'Belarus: Media Under Attack as European Games Loom', Human Rights Watch, 17 May 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/17/belarus-media-under-attack-european-games-loom>.

FIGURE 8
Main source of information

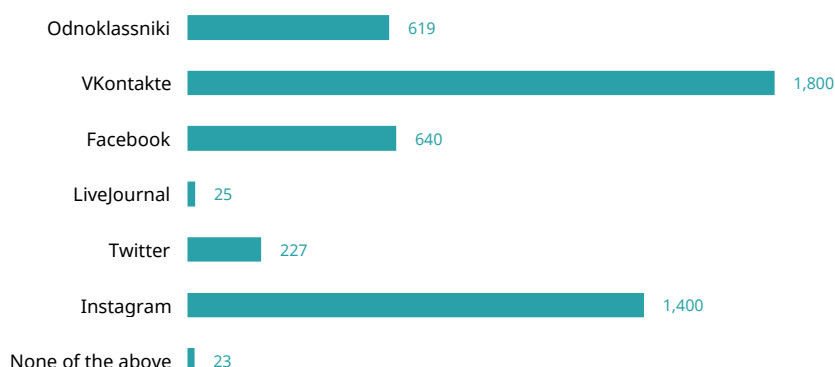


Source: ZOiS

administrative rules. Conventional media are largely state controlled, with all TV stations in the hands of the government.

Like in other European countries, the resource young people use first and foremost to learn about political events is online media. The most frequently used platform is VKontakte (VK.com), the Russian-language equivalent to Facebook, which 23 per cent of young people use as their first source of information. ► **FIGURE 8** In our sample, VKontakte users tended to be younger, have a lower household income, and be less religious. YouTube is used the second most often, by 12 per cent of young Belarusians as the first source of information.

FIGURE 9
Social media use

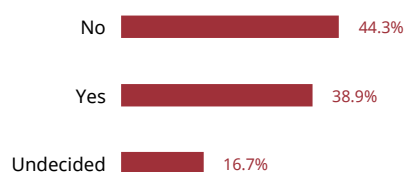


Source: ZOiS

Other Internet sources such as the independent web portal TUT.BY are important. However, Belarusian TV was frequently consulted as the first source of information by nearly 14 per cent of respondents, whereas Russian TV was used by less than 4 per cent. Belarusian TV, newspapers, and radio were more often accessed by people with higher trust in the president, young people with children, and women. Of little importance were foreign broadcasting services.

In some authoritarian contexts, social media emerge as an important alternative source of information and communication for young people. Young Belarusians tend to use numerous social media platforms, and only very few respondents said they used none at all. ► **FIGURE 9**

FIGURE 10
Are you interested in politics?



n = 1,978

Source: ZOiS

Political interest and engagement

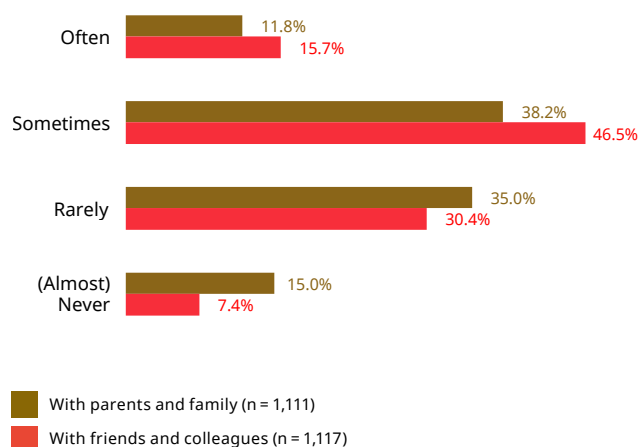
Interest in and knowledge of politics

Asked whether they were interested in politics, 39 per cent of respondents stated that they were.¹⁴ ► **FIGURE 10** Of those interested in politics or undecided, a majority (65 per cent) expressed an interest in both international and domestic politics. Young people tend to discuss politics more often with

¹⁴ This value is below the 45 per cent of the general population who stated they were at least somewhat interested, according to the 2017 European Values Study. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/survey-2017/>

FIGURE 11

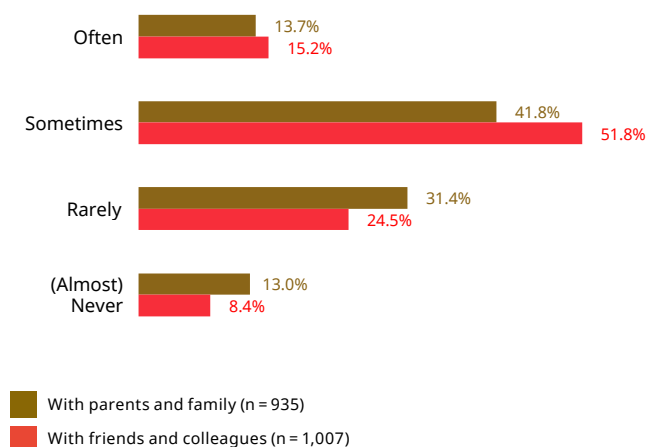
Frequency of political discussions



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 12

When you discuss politics, how often do you disagree?



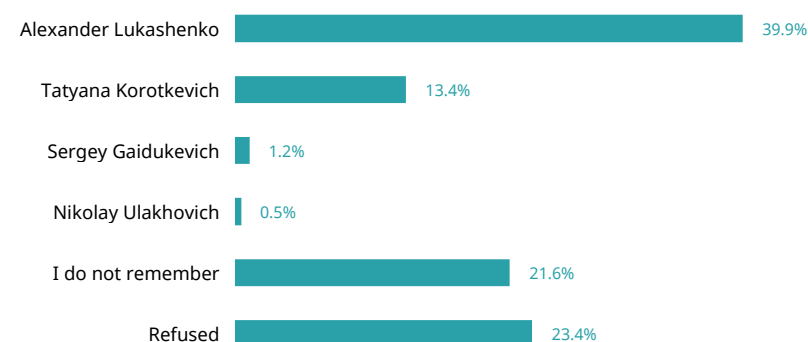
Source: ZOiS

friends or colleagues than with family members: 16 per cent said they did so often with friends and colleagues, whereas 12 per cent said the same for family members. Another 15 per cent underlined that they (almost) never discussed politics with their family. ► FIGURE 11 There is also significantly more disagreement between friends with 67 per cent mentioning that they often or sometimes disagree with them, whereas only 55 per cent mentioned political disagreement with family members. ► FIGURE 12

This practice of discussion suggests there is room for political disagreement primarily with friends and colleagues but less in the narrower family realm. Older Belarusians in our survey and those with higher household incomes were more involved in political discussions with friends and family alike. A high frequency of political discussions correlates with a significantly higher knowledge of protests and a higher self-assessment of knowledge about the country's history. The latter two factors also relate to more political disagreement. However, socio-economic factors — age, income, education — do not relate to the frequency of political disagreement overall.

Our survey included a set of picture quizzes and factual questions aimed at understanding young Belarusians' political and historical knowledge. Respondents could acquire a total of ten points, which less than 1 per cent of them managed to do. Nearly half of the respondents scored four or five points. Almost all correctly identified US president Donald Trump, most of them German chancellor Angela Merkel, and half of them Belarusian prime minister Sergey Rumas; around one-quarter could identify Ukraine's then president Petro Poroshenko. Men's quiz scores were significantly higher than those of women; education and household income also positively correlated with political and historical knowledge. Respondents with children tended to have lower quiz scores.

FIGURE 13
Vote choice in presidential elections 2015



n = 1,027

Source: ZOIS

Formal politics: voting behaviour

The outcomes of elections in Belarus have long been predictable, and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) regularly criticises elections in the country. The OSCE election observation mission for the 2016 parliamentary election concluded that the vote proceeded in an orderly manner, but ‘serious procedural deficiencies, inconsistencies and irregularities were observed’.¹⁵ The 2015 presidential election also failed to meet international standards and met harsh criticism; the OSCE underlined that ‘the counting of votes and tabulation of election results undermined the integrity of the election’.¹⁶

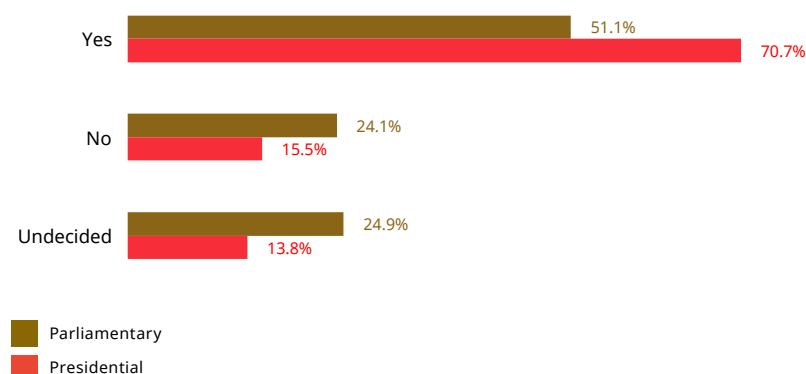
The upcoming parliamentary election on 17 November 2019 and the presidential election to be held by August 2020 are likely to suffer from similar shortcomings. Although some opposition candidates might end up in the parliament to appease the West, the elections themselves do not promise to bring about significant change. So what do young citizens make of being able to vote when they lack a real choice? Asked whether they had participated in the 2015 presidential election, about 51 per cent of those over 18 said they had. The turnout, according to the Central Electoral Commission, stood at 87 per cent for the general population. A total of five candidates were allowed to run and Lukashenko won with a total of 84 per cent of the vote.

We also asked respondents whom they had voted for in 2015. This question was less geared towards assessing the actual vote four years ago and more towards providing information about current preferences. In our sample,

¹⁵ ‘Republic of Belarus, Parliamentary Elections 11 September 2016, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report’, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 8 December 2016, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/287486?download=true>.

¹⁶ ‘Republic of Belarus, Presidential Election 11 October 2015, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report’, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 28 January 2016, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/belarus/218981?download=true>.

FIGURE 14
Intentions to vote in parliamentary and presidential elections



n = 1,879

Source: ZOiS

40 per cent of those who had participated in the election said they gave their vote to Lukashenko, and 13 per cent to opposition candidate Tatyana Korotkevich; more than 20 per cent could not remember, and an even higher share refused to answer (► FIGURE 13), indicating the sensitive nature of such a question. Support for Lukashenko was particularly high among those who self-identified as religious. The vote in 2015 for Lukashenko also correlates strongly with not knowing about recent protests in the country and the use of conventional media.

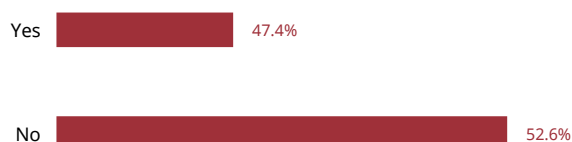
To further understand the atmosphere around the last presidential election, we asked how many of the respondents' five closest friends had voted. This value primarily indicates the extent to which the election was remembered as having been politicised and discussed in social networks. Including only the valid answers, the hypothetical turnout would have been about 60 per cent among young people, although more than 40 per cent did not answer the question or said they did not know whether their friends had voted.

These results indicate the low extent to which elections leave a salient trace in the memories of respondents. This characterisation was further explored with a survey question about the reason for not voting. The most frequent response was that voting would not make a difference (39 per cent) or that the respondents did not care (20 per cent). Other reasons, given by around 10 per cent of respondents each, were registration issues, a view that abstention was a way of showing disapproval of the system, or a feeling that nobody represented one's political beliefs.

Elections have hardly left a salient trace in the memories of respondents.

Looking at the upcoming elections, around half of those young people who were of voting age in February 2019 said they were going to vote in the 2019 parliamentary election. Around one-quarter remained undecided. Turnout for presidential elections in Belarus is generally higher, and in our sample 71 per cent of those of voting age stated that they intended to participate in the 2020 election. ► FIGURE 14 Women and people who self-identified as religious were more likely to want to participate in the upcoming elections.

FIGURE 15
Knowledge about protest over the last 12 months



n = 1,929

Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 16
Participation in political and environmental protest



Political & social (n=885)
 Environmental (n=895)

Source: ZOiS

Informal politics: knowledge of and participation in protests

The police crackdown on political and social protests in Belarus has typically been forceful and has complemented general restrictions on civil society. Over recent years, 25 March, celebrated by the opposition as Freedom Day, has been a day for attempts to rally in Minsk and beyond. Each March, the opposition tries to mark the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (1918–19), which Lukashenko dismissed in 2018 as a 'dismal page of our history'. In 2018, marking the 100th anniversary of the republic, an opposition march was forbidden and instead an official concert celebration in the city centre was organised. This year, authorities did not approve any mobilisation and police detained several opposition activists before 25 March. In the city of Grodno, however, several thousand people were able to gather without any arrests.¹⁷

At the same time, it is very difficult for protest movements to gain attention in the state-controlled media, and pre-emptive arrests remain common. Protests require permissions that are frequently denied by local authorities, and organisers need to pay for security during the event, adding a financial hurdle. Increasingly, authorities fine protesters, although arrests still occur as well. Freedom of association is severely restricted.¹⁸

Our survey asked whether young people knew about social and political protests. ► **FIGURE 15** Given the considerable barriers that exist for accessing such information, the fact that 47 per cent knew about protests at all is remarkable. Knowledge was higher among male respondents and those with higher household incomes. Participation, however, is very low, as one

17 Alesia Rudnik, 'Belarusian Freedom Day 2019: are the authorities warming to the idea?', BelarusDigest, 25 March 2019, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-freedom-day-2019-are-the-authorities-warming-to-the-idea/>.

18 'Belarus' in 'Freedom in the World 2019', Freedom House, accessed 12 September 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/belarus>.

might expect. From those who knew about protests, a mere 3 per cent said that they had been involved. ► **FIGURE 16** The survey data also indicated that 23 per cent considered protest a useful form of political engagement.

Political youth organisations: not convinced

Official youth organisations have been a critical component of youth politics in Belarus. The official Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), the state-funded successor of the Soviet-era Komsomol of Belarus, enjoys a quasi-monopoly. Officially, some 480,000 people aged between 14 and 31 were members in 2014. Some other small youth organisations also exist, such as the youth wing of the Belarusian National Front, the Belarusian National Youth Council, and the Young Christian Democrats.

Asked whether they thought that young people should get organised in specific political youth organisations to make their voices heard, 45 per cent of respondents said that they should, whereas most were unsure or against the idea. Asked, however, whether they thought that the government should get young people involved in youth organisations, a little less than one-third of respondents thought that it should, while 41 per cent said it should not.

► **FIGURE 17**

In addition to these assessments, we enquired whether respondents were themselves members of a youth organisation. Seventy-two per cent stated that they were not, and others who were members underlined that they were so on a compulsory basis. Clearly the data speak to the disillusion young people have experienced with state-orchestrated involvement. Although young people still become members of the BRSM, many do so in a manner that expresses no support for the regime. Instead, involvement in youth organisations has become part of a ritualised act that people tend to pursue jointly with friends.

Ninety-two per cent of those who reported that they were members of youth organisations mentioned the BRSM. The remaining bodies formed a diverse list of smaller associations and clubs. Asked whether there was a youth organisation in Belarus they would consider joining, 5.5 per cent said yes, with the Belarusian Association of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Clubs being most frequently cited, as well as other movements involved in social activities.

Assessing developments in Belarus

A negative view on their country's path

Asked whether they thought that over the last decade the situation for ordinary people in their country had improved, 16 per cent of the young Belarusians surveyed thought this was the case, and the same share was undecided. More than 57 per cent did not believe that Belarus's development was going in the right direction. Pursuing this question further, we asked about people's assessments of the last decade specifically for young

FIGURE 17
Should the government get young people into official youth organisations?

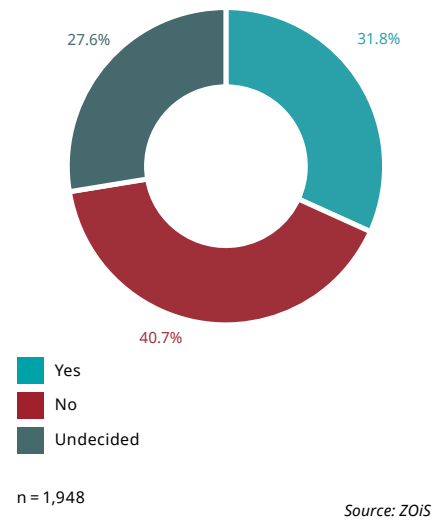
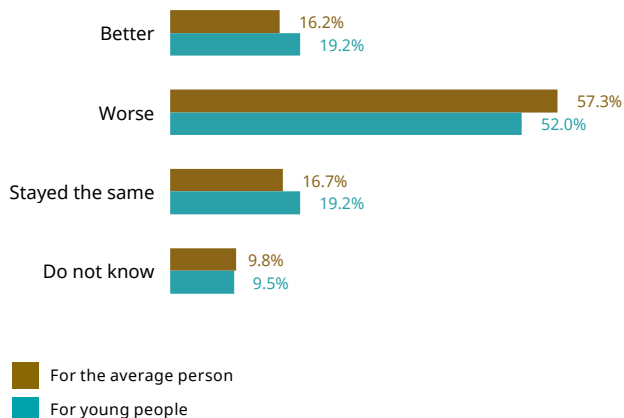


FIGURE 18

In your opinion, have things generally got better or worse over the last decade?

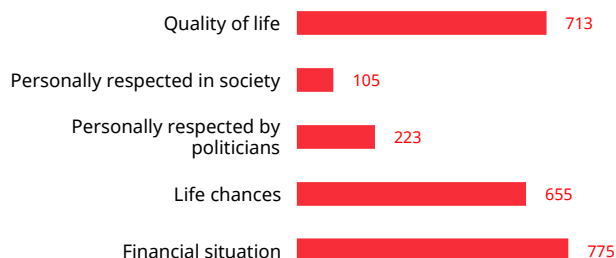


n = 2,006

Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 19

Specific ways in which things got worse



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 20

Best era to be a young person

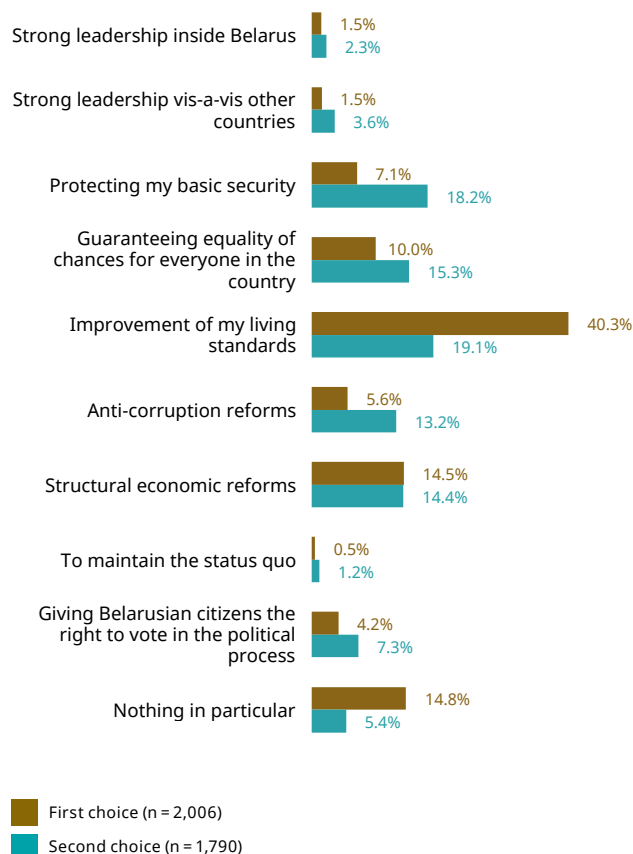


n = 1,975

Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 21

What do you expect from those in government?



Source: ZOiS

people. Here the picture that emerges is slightly less negative, with 19 per cent stating that things had got better and 52 per cent that they had got worse. ► **FIGURE 18**

We asked those who gave a pessimistic view to spell out their assessments in more detail. Presented with five options, respondents said that their financial situation, life chances, and quality of life had deteriorated. Being less respected in society, specifically by politicians, was cited less often. However, less respect from politicians was still mentioned by more than 20 per cent of those who said that things had worsened. ► **FIGURE 19** Women, people with a lower household income, and those living outside Minsk were more likely to hold negative views on the last decade. Trust in the president lay behind positive assessments of developments over the last ten years.

A further perspective on how young people assess their lives was obtained by enquiring how they benchmarked the present against other periods. We asked the following question: ‘Some adults and older people think that life was better in the past. In your opinion, in which era was it best to be a young person like you in Belarus?’. ► **FIGURE 20**

Although nearly 60 per cent said the best period was the current one, referring to the time since the 2000s, 8 per cent opted for the 1990s, despite the economic instability and hyperinflation of that decade. Ten per cent favoured the communist era. Important to note is that more than 20 per cent of young people selected no response. So while it is not the case that the young have a nostalgic longing for the period of their parents, they are also not clearly convinced that the present era is the most desirable one.

Economic and political concerns

Belarusian youth overwhelmingly (40 per cent) ranked the improvement of living standards as the top priority of the government. ► **FIGURE 21** Related to this concern, 14 per cent of young people mentioned structural economic reforms as their first expectation. After the most recent economic shock of 2015–16, the economy has been growing for the last three years and private consumption rose considerably throughout 2018.

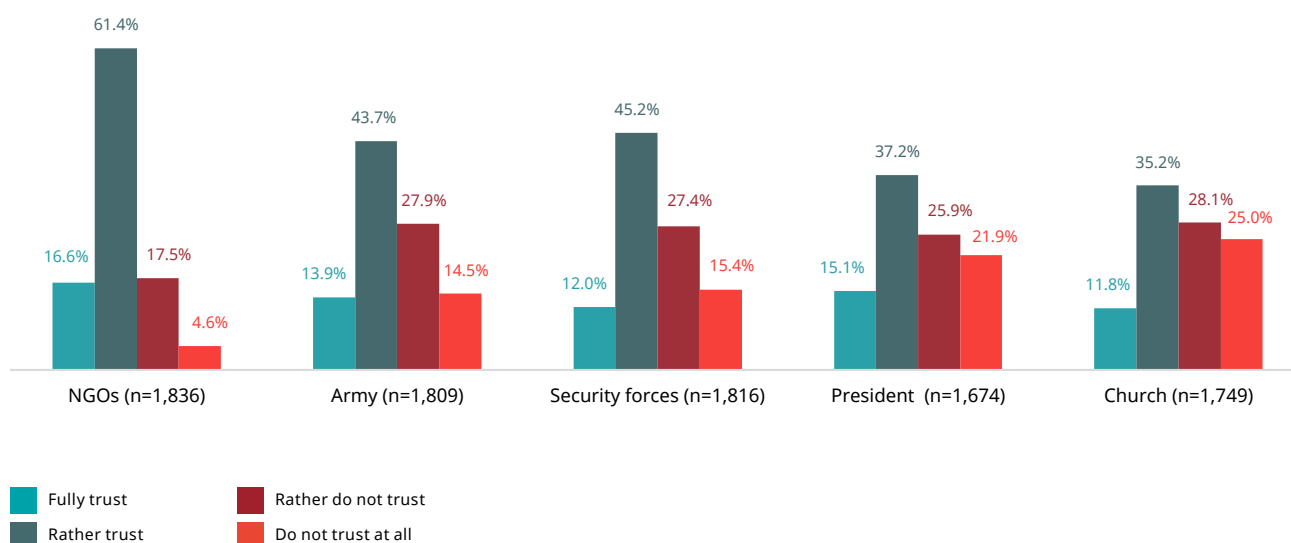
However, the economic recovery is predicted to slow.¹⁹ Despite the upturn in domestic demand and exports, productivity growth remains low alongside an unfavourable regional economic climate. Meanwhile, the private sector is small, hindered by far-reaching state involvement in the economy; the structural weakness of state-owned enterprises persists. The responses given by young people reflect that the country’s gradual economic improvement over recent years has not benefited the broader population.

The improvement of living standards was ranked as the top priority.

19 ‘Belarus Needs to Strengthen Competitiveness for Economic Resilience and Robust Growth, Says Report’, World Bank Press Release, 5 June 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/06/05/belarus-economic-update-spring-2019>.

FIGURE 22

To what extent do you trust...



Source: ZOiS

Trust in people and institutions

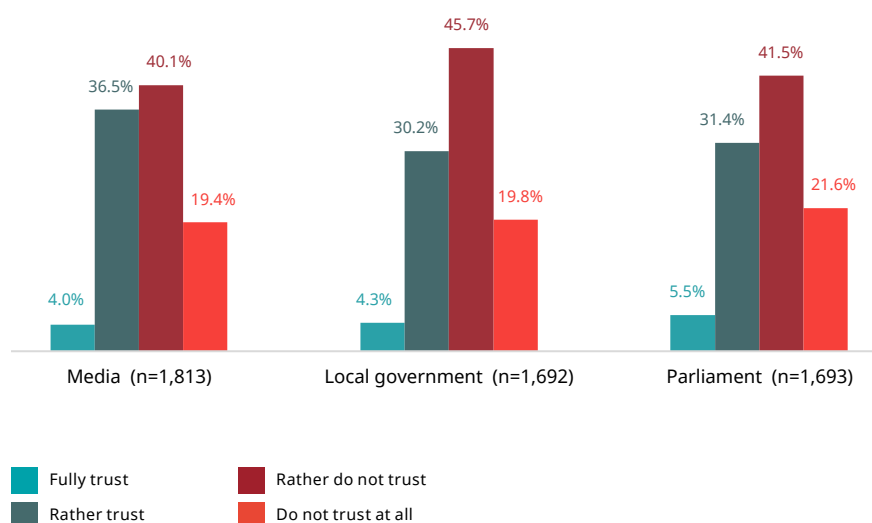
The question of trust in public institutions is a particularly salient indicator of how citizens relate to their political and social environment in an authoritarian system. In a context where the vote helps little to gain information about preferences, trust values make for an important insight into society. In previous surveys among the general population, the Orthodox Church has usually come out as the most trusted institution.²⁰ Previous surveys have also shown that the proportion of those who do not trust major state institutions outweighs those who do.

Turning to young people, their trust values suggest a split between three groups of institutions. ► **FIGURE 22** First, the highest trust levels were achieved on the one hand by volunteer organisations and NGOs, and on the other hand by the army and the security forces. This is similar to the situation in other Central and East European countries where the security apparatus continues to maintain a high prestige. In Belarus, the army is seen as protecting the country externally and is somewhat removed from daily politics. The high trust in the army expressed by young Belarusians is comparable with the positive views on the military that prevail across the

20 'Belarus Country Report', BTI 2018, Bertelsmann Stiftung, accessed 12 September 2019, <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/BLR/>.

FIGURE 23

To what extent do you trust...



Source: ZOiS

broader population.²¹ Trust in the security apparatus was particularly high among younger and female respondents and those outside the capital. Consumption of state-controlled media correlated positively with trust in the security services. Views on NGOs were rather consistent among respondents.

Second, scores for the president and the Orthodox Church were mixed, revealing the most divided views. The president received on average slightly more positive trust values, although this was a particularly sensitive question and respondents might have self-censored their views. Higher trust in the president was expressed by young respondents, women, those with children, and people who lived outside Minsk. Meanwhile, young people saw the Orthodox Church rather negatively.

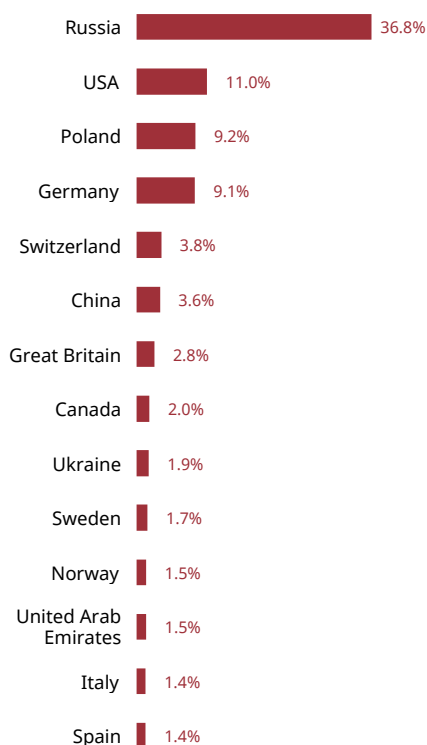
Finally, there was a set of institutions with overwhelmingly negative trust values. ► **FIGURE 23** These were the Belarusian mass media, local politicians, and the parliament. The negative trust scores for the media reflected the lack of trustworthy independent media in the country. The views of young people correspond to the negative opinions that prevail across the population.²²

21 'Negative dynamics of trust to institutes', Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, accessed 12 September 2019, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=1489>.

22 'Dar'ya Urban: Tsennosti naseleniya Belarusi – Rezul'taty natsional'nogo oprosa nasele-niya', Issledovatel'skii tsentr IPM, May 2019, http://kef.by/upload/iblock/5fd/SR_19_01.pdf.

FIGURE 24

Belarus should develop closer relations with...

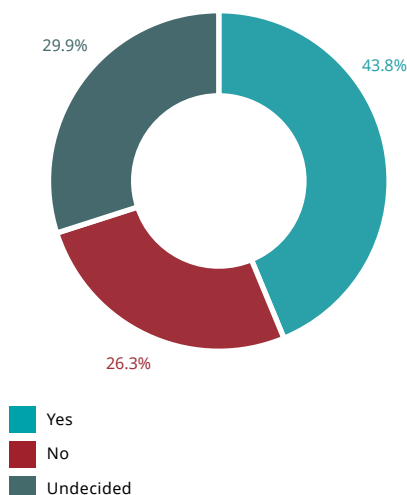


n = 1,404

Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 25

Should Lukashenko seek closer cooperation with EU countries, even if it means estrangement from Russia?

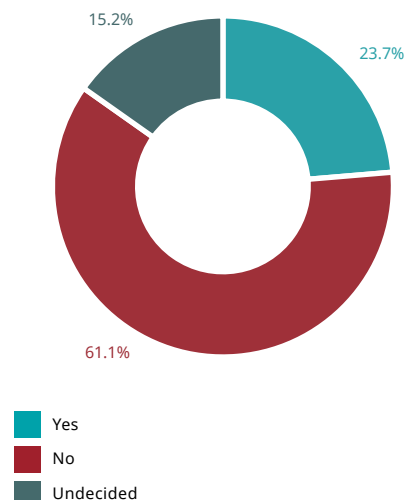


n = 1,920

Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 26

Should Belarus and Russia unite in one state?



n = 1,965

Source: ZOiS

Belarus and the world

Foreign policy orientation

To understand respondents' foreign policy outlook, the survey asked them which one country Belarus should have closer relations with in the future. By far the most frequently mentioned country was the Russian Federation, suggested by more than 36 per cent of respondents. ► **FIGURE 24** Russia was followed by the US, Poland, and Germany, all three of which received around 10 per cent. Taken together, current EU countries accounted for 31 per cent of the responses.

Despite recent complications, Russia remains the closest partner for Belarus and there are deep economic, political, and cultural ties. Unlike a previous study by the Institute of Sociology, our survey does not suggest that young people seek closer cooperation with China, which only 3.6 per cent of our sample mentioned, despite the widely covered Belt and Road Initiative affecting Belarus.²³

With nearly one-third of respondents mentioning EU countries, it is clear that Russia and the EU seem similarly attractive to young Belarusians. Asked whether Lukashenko should seek closer cooperation with EU countries even at the risk of unsettling relations with Russia, however, respondents gave

23 'Pavel Vorob'ev: Vospriyatie belorusskoi molodezh'y u soyuza s Rossiei menyaetsya', Institut Sotsiologii, 27 November 2018, <https://socio.bas-net.by/vospriyatie-belorusskojmolo-dezhyu-soyuza-s-rossiej-menyaetsya/>.

mixed answers. A little more than 40 per cent wished for closer cooperation, whereas one-quarter did not. ► **FIGURE 25** On relations with Russia, we asked whether respondents thought the two countries should unite as one state, effectively realising the aim of the 1999 Union State treaty. Less than one-quarter of respondents favoured this scenario, and more than 60 per cent opposed it. ► **FIGURE 26** In this regard, the current caution and distance that the Belarusian political leadership takes in its policy towards Russia is in accordance with the mood of younger citizens.

Travel experience

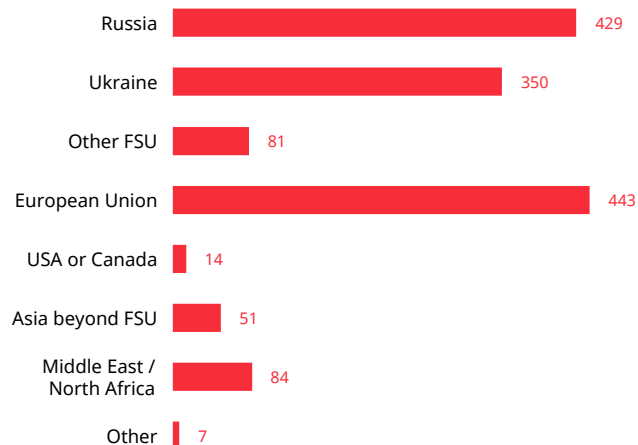
Mobility within Belarus is high, and nearly 80 per cent of respondents had travelled beyond their place of residence over the last twelve months. When it comes to international mobility, the picture looks very different. Less than half of respondents had travelled abroad over the past year. Those who travelled had been to EU countries or Russia (more than 20 per cent each), and around 18 per cent had visited Ukraine. ► **FIGURE 27**

By far the most frequent reason for travelling abroad was tourism (64 per cent). The second most common reason were visits to family members and friends, both together adding up to 15 per cent. Nearly 11 per cent mentioned work and almost 2 per cent studying.

Among those who had travelled within or beyond Belarus for work or had lived abroad, the largest number of respondents (16 per cent) had gone to Russia. A little more than 12 per cent of those who had lived or worked abroad had been to EU countries. ► **FIGURE 28**

FIGURE 27

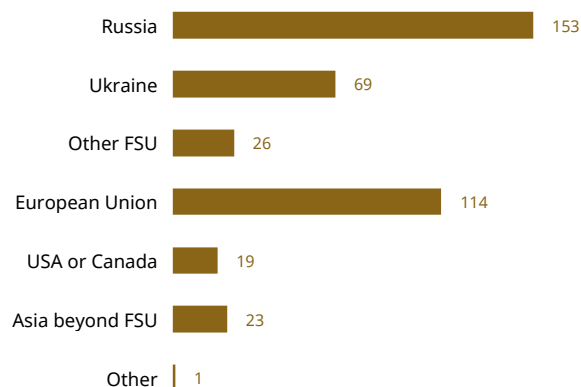
Over the last year, have you travelled to...



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 28

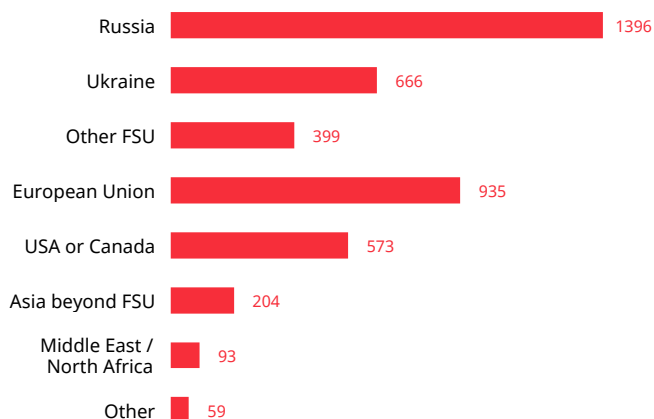
Have you lived or worked in...



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 29

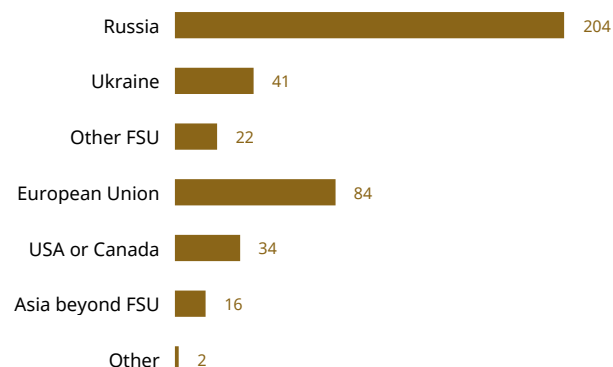
Residence of relatives abroad



Source: ZOlS

FIGURE 30

Received money from relatives or friends who live...



Source: ZOlS

Young Belarusians are connected internationally and around one-fifth received money from abroad.

Nearly half of the respondents indicated that they had relatives or friends in EU countries, while nearly 70 per cent had personal links to Russia. Personal ties to Ukraine were also relatively high, with one-third of respondents reporting family or friends there. Twenty-nine per cent of respondents mentioned personal links to the US and/or Canada. ► **FIGURE 29** These numbers underline the extent to which young Belarusians are connected internationally, a potentially important characteristic given the economic and political implications of such transnational links. Two-thirds of respondents with transnational connections said that the links related to people who had left since 2000, highlighting a relatively recent emigration rather than older historical connections.

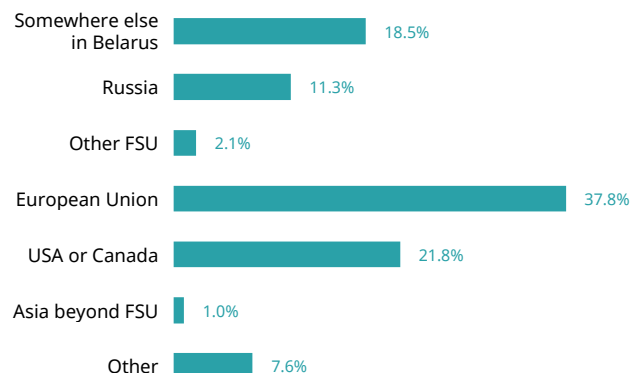
An important component of personal links beyond one's place of residence is the flow of money from different parts of the country or from abroad. ► **FIGURE 30** Among the survey respondents, around one-fifth said that they received money from abroad. For context, the overall flow of remittances that can be officially registered is somewhat negligible for Belarus. The most recent data from the World Bank put remittances at 2 per cent of total GDP for 2018.²⁴

Migration intentions

Intentions to migrate are an important indicator of how well a population thinks its country is doing relative to other places and how it will perform in the future. Additionally, young people have a higher propensity to leave their place of residence. In Belarus, our survey shows that two-thirds would like to leave where they live, either to emigrate or to migrate within the

24 'Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)', World Bank, accessed 12 September 2019, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=BY&most_recent_value_desc=true.

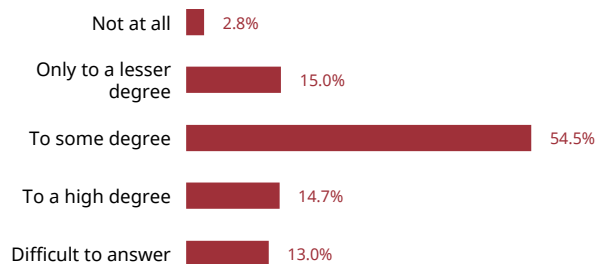
FIGURE 31
Where would you like to go?



n = 1,120

Source: ZOIS

FIGURE 32
Are your values shared by other people in Belarus?



n = 1,990

Source: ZOIS

country.²⁵ Only 28 per cent wanted to remain where they were. The driving factor for understanding who wants to leave is income. Higher household wealth predicts aspirations of mobility.

Asked where they would like to go, most respondents were attracted to EU countries in general (38 per cent) as well as to the US and Canada (12 per cent). A sizable share of those respondents who wanted to leave their place of residence wished to move within Belarus, either to Minsk or somewhere else (18 per cent). Russia was mentioned by only 11 per cent. ► **FIGURE 31**

As triggers for their possible departure, 47 per cent of young Belarusians mentioned the combined worsening of the country's political and economic situation. A worsening economy alone was cited by 32 per cent and a deteriorating political situation by only 1.6 per cent. Knowing others who had already left, which might make emigration easier, was given by 7 per cent of respondents as a motivation to leave.

Values and ideas of community

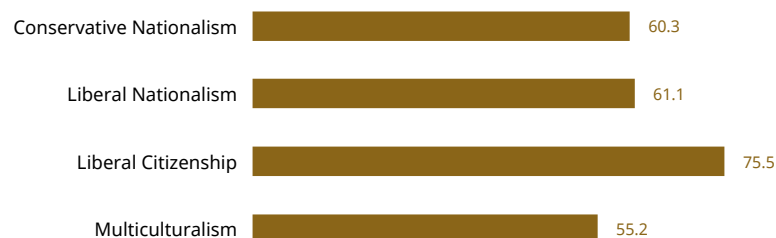
Young Belarusians overall think that others living in Belarus share their values. Nearly 70 per cent affirmed that values were shared to a high or some degree. ► **FIGURE 32** Pursuing this question further, we asked how

25 This is above the already high value for Russia, where 54 per cent wanted to leave; see Félix Krawatzek and Gwendolyn Sasse, 'Youth in Russia: Outlook on Life and Political Attitudes', Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS), Report 1 / 2018, June 2018, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/zois-report/zois-report-12018/>. For comparison, in Poland one-third wanted to leave their place of residence, Félix Krawatzek, 'Youth in Poland: Outlook on Life and Political Attitudes', Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS), Report 4 / 2019, September 2019, https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOIS_Reports/ZOIS_Report_4_2019.pdf.

FIGURE 33

Community values

Average support on a scale from 1 to 100*



* Respondents were asked to agree / disagree (on a scale) with each of the statements underlying these categories.

Source: ZOiS

much young people tended to trust others they meet for the first time. Fifty-five per cent of respondents indicated that they mostly did not trust others. The remaining respondents were split between those who did not trust strangers at all and those who mostly trusted them. A negligible fraction of respondents said they fully trusted others.

We also used a range of questions to enquire into the broader community values held by respondents. Here we included a set of questions relating to how respondents envisaged the Belarusian social and political community they would like to live in. The answers to eight questions were aggregated into four separate indices on views on community: conservative-national, liberal-national, liberal citizenship, and multicultural.

The **conservative-national** index included statements that affirm the importance of following the same customs and traditions in a country and the centrality of national culture and history to the school curriculum. The **liberal-national** index emphasised gaining access to the citizenship of the country while stressing the need for immigrants to identify with their national culture. The **liberal citizenship** index indicated that all citizens should have the same opportunities in life and stressed the importance of free speech, including the right to criticise religion. The **multicultural** index emphasised that it is best if a country is diverse and suggested that the state should make additional efforts to cultivate that diversity.

Belarusian youth expressed the highest commitment to a **liberal** understanding of identity centred on citizenship and the exercise of **citizenship** duties. This was by far the highest-scoring category. This value was followed by the **liberal** and conservative understandings of **nationalism**. In other words, Belarusian youth expressed support for ideas that emphasise the importance of preserving national culture and passing on national history. The **multicultural** interpretation of identity received a low score among respondents. ► FIGURE 33

Conclusion

Belarus is heading towards a time of profound change. The country is increasingly participating in Western dialogue, including discussions about possible visa liberalisation, and engaging civil society in dialogue. Some US financial sanctions and EU restrictive measures have been suspended. European banks continue to augment their investment portfolios in Belarus.

At the same time, links with Russia remain of utmost importance — politically, economically, and on the level of society. In addition, the liberalisation Belarus started in 2015 has not been pursued, as press freedom and freedom of assembly are still severely restricted. In this international climate, where the EU as well as Russia have to manage their domestic problems and a shifting international scene, Belarus is bound to position itself in a new way.

Young people's views about this reorientation matter to understand not what will happen next but what preferences and perceptions the years of Lukashenko's rule have created. Clearly, young people value a European outlook as well as connections with Russia. The societal values of young Belarusians mirror norms that can be found in other East and Central European countries, but mobility and personal links remain higher with countries of the former Soviet Union. The picture that emerges of Belarusian youth is therefore a fractured one, which is also conveyed in the trust young people express in political institutions, their expectations of the government, and their political interests. Tellingly, trust is high for NGOs and the military, mixed for the president, and low for the media.

The upcoming election cycle will not bring about fundamental political changes. But the parliamentary election this autumn and the presidential vote next year matter for what happens thereafter. Lukashenko has indicated potential changes to the constitution, electoral reform from a majoritarian to a mixed or proportional system to create a meaningful choice of parties, and the possibility to shift some presidential functions to other institutions. These changes will not come quickly, but they take place in a situation where important leadership transitions are happening across the post-Soviet space. In this context, the expectations and worldviews of young people will have to be taken into consideration amid profound changes across society.

Imprint

Author

Dr. Félix Krawatzek

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Address

Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH
Mohrenstraße 60
10117 Berlin
info@zois-berlin.de
www.zois-berlin.de

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