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# ZOiS REPORT

## **BELARUS AT A CROSSROADS: ATTITUDES ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE**

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## Executive summary

Following months of mass antigovernment demonstrations in Belarus, this report widens the focus beyond the protesters and takes stock of the views and preferences of Belarusian citizens at a critical moment. A new ZOiS survey conducted in December 2020 among Belarusians aged between 16 and 64 reveals rare insights into the political and social mood across the country, trust in its institutions, the dynamics of the recent political mobilisation, and the domestic and foreign policy preferences of Belarusian citizens.

The main findings are as follows:

- There is an overall societal consensus that the result of the August 2020 Belarusian presidential election was falsified in favour of the incumbent. Around two-thirds of the survey respondents partly or completely agreed with this statement.
- About 14 per cent of respondents participated in protests after the election. On a national scale, that corresponds to roughly 700,000 people out of the

5 million represented by the survey. Views on the protests are diverse, ranging from agreement to disagreement; a sizeable share of respondents did not express an opinion on the demonstrations.

- Nearly half of the respondents reported that they personally knew somebody who had taken part in the protests. There was widespread knowledge of the context and demands of the protests, irrespective of people's own participation.
- The survey confirms the extent to which the protests were carried by private citizens, rather than organised civil society, trade unions, or churches, which played only peripheral roles.
- Social and online media dominate society's news consumption, with over 70 per cent of respondents using these media as their main source of information. Belarusian state television, Russian media, and international media are used as well but are significantly less prominent as primary information sources.
- Trust in Belarus's political institutions in general remains weak. Confidence has not eroded completely, but trust in all institutions is on balance negative, with very similar scores for the executive, the legislative, the judiciary, and the security apparatus. In absolute numbers, the opposition Coordination Council and the Orthodox Church are the most trusted institutions.
- Violence by the security structures is an important issue of fear and concern for Belarusian citizens. In particular, those who had participated in protests reported that they, their family members, or their friends had been directly affected by police violence.
- Views on the country's national flag are divided: 41 per cent of respondents saw the current red-green flag as the appropriate state symbol, whereas 36 per cent preferred the white-red-white flag, which has also become the symbol of the protests.
- Concerns about personal finances are widespread. Eighty per cent of respondents stated that they were very or somewhat concerned about their personal finances in the six months to come. Economic considerations rank high among people's political priorities, alongside democratic expectations, such as having a real voice in the political process, and the defence of the country's independence.
- Support for democracy is uneven, reflecting an ideational vacuum rather than deep divisions. More than 40 per cent of respondents said they would prefer to live in a democracy, but about 30 per cent did not know what type of government they favoured.
- Most respondents, in particular those who are pro-democratic and critical of the current regime, were likely to stress liberal components, such as

political and civil rights, in their understanding of democracy. Non-protesters tended to lack a clear understanding of democracy or preferred an authoritarian form of government.

- Most respondents supported market competition and state intervention in social issues. Protesters were more likely to support liberal economic values, while non-protesters preferred a paternalist state that ensures social security and equality.
- In terms of foreign policy preferences, relations with both the European Union (EU) and Russia are considered important. Most respondents favoured close economic links with Russia, but not further political integration. Easier travel to the EU figured prominently among expectations vis-à-vis the European Union.
- Migration intentions loom large: about half of respondents said that they were considering leaving their city. Of those, about 34 per cent would prefer to move to an EU country.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Belarusians have lived through a most extraordinary year. In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic hit Belarus badly, as its leadership repeatedly mocked the virus and decried what it saw as hysterical reactions to the pandemic in Western countries. Then, the August 2020 presidential election gave rise to the most significant political mobilisation since the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The official election result was a reiteration of the previous supermajorities that Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka has regularly claimed since his first election in 1994. But this time around, with a credible presidential challenger in Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, parts of society were not ready to accept the official outcome.

The blatant falsification of the election result has been widely documented and is known to most Belarusians.<sup>2</sup> The electoral manipulation and the immediate violence against the first protesters mobilised hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets. Over six months later, the protests continue in the form of smaller marches and neighbourhood actions, but relentless repression has forced the protesters off the streets, curtailed independent domestic reporting of the demonstrations, and, in turn, diverted international attention.

Given the repressive regime in Belarus, it is nearly impossible to gather reliable data on the public mood across the country. This report presents the

1 The authors gratefully acknowledge the excellent research assistance provided by Nadja Sieffert in the preparation and analysis of the survey data, and are also thankful to Willi Stieger for his able support. The survey referred to in this ZOiS Report was funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. The interpretation reflects the authors' views.

2 Wolfgang Benedek, 'OSCE Rapporteur's Report under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations related to the Presidential Elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus', Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 29 October 2020 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/b/469539.pdf>.

results of one of the first large surveys of political and social views carried out since the start of the mass protests.<sup>3</sup> In view of safety concerns, the survey was carried out online from 16 to 29 December 2020. Just over 2,000 Belarusians aged between 16 and 64 and living in cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants responded to the questionnaire. The respondents were chosen based on quotas for age, gender, and place of residence to achieve a representative sample for these socio-demographic characteristics.

Telephone surveys, which may have allowed for the inclusion of the oldest members of society, are no longer safe to conduct under the circumstances. The quality of the response data would also have been in doubt. The online survey, carried out for this report, provides one of the first insights since the election into people's attitudes towards ongoing social and political developments and their visions for the future.

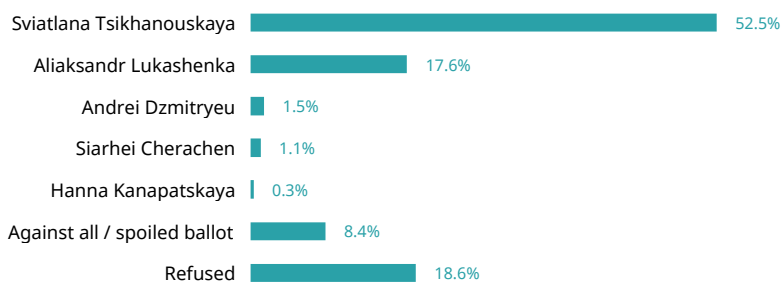
## A fraudulent election that led to a political awakening

Across Belarus, 65 per cent of those surveyed partly or completely agreed that the 2020 presidential election result had been falsified in favour of the incumbent. In particular, the better-educated urban class shared this view, which was more prevalent among male respondents. Of the people sampled, 74 per cent indicated that they had voted in the election, compared with the official turnout of 84 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

The actual outcome of the contested election may never be known. In our survey, about 53 per cent of those who voted said they had opted for Tsikhanouskaya, and about 18 per cent for Lukashenka. ► **FIGURE 1** A closer look at

**FIGURE 1**

**Which candidate of the presidency did you vote for?\***



\*The sum of the rounded percentages in the report may diverge slightly from 100 per cent.

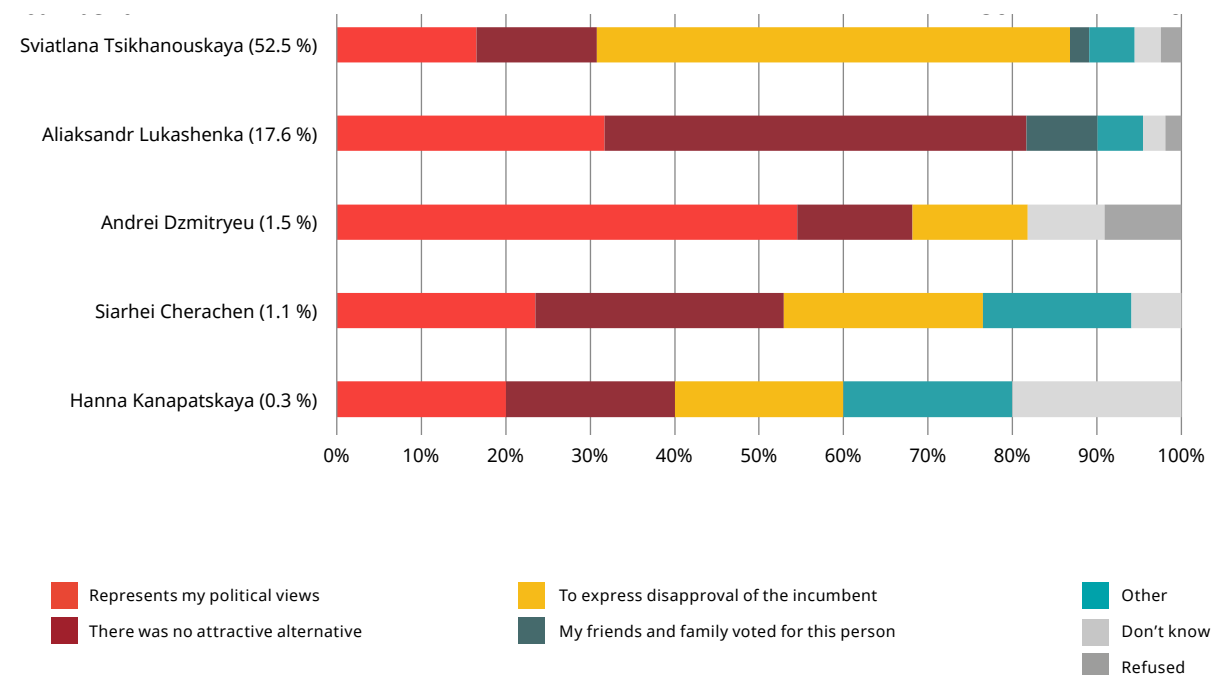
n = 1,485

Source: ZOiS

- 3 ZOiS has conducted three previous studies in Belarus focusing on people aged 34 or younger. See, for instance, Félix Krawatzek, 'Youth in Belarus: Outlook on Life and Political Attitudes', Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), Report 5 / 2019, 24 October 2019, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/youth-in-belarus-outlook-on-life-and-political-attitudes>.
- 4 Soobshcheniye Tsentral'noy komissii Respubliki Belarus', 'Ob itogakh vyborov prezidenta respubliki Belarus' v 2020 godu', 14 August 2020, <http://www.rec.gov.by/files/2020/inf9.pdf>

FIGURE 2

## Why did you vote for the candidate?



n = 1,085

Source: ZOIS

these responses reveals that Lukashenka's support was highest among older and female respondents, people living in small cities, people with higher household incomes, and individuals who declare themselves to be followers of the Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, being male, being a student, living in a larger city, or working in the private sector correlated positively with voting for Tsikhanouskaya.

When asked about the reasons for their vote choice, the largest share of those who had voted for Tsikhanouskaya said they wanted to express their disapproval of the incumbent. Those who had voted for Lukashenka, by contrast, indicated that they did so because of a lack of an attractive alternative.

► **FIGURE 2** This reasoning is important: a mere quarter of the people who voted for Lukashenka did so because he represented their political views. A vote for Tsikhanouskaya was primarily a vote against the incumbent.

The fraudulent election triggered months of antigovernment protests. To gain a deeper understanding of the protest movement, our survey explored the defining characteristics and motivations of the protesters, attitudes towards the demonstrations, and the broader politicisation of Belarusian society.

## Widespread participation in protests

Pictures of thousands of people on the streets of Belarus dominated media coverage of the country for a good part of 2020. According to our data, 14 per cent of Belarusians have participated in protests since the presidential election. ► **FIGURE 3** Just under 6 per cent of those surveyed refused to say whether they had taken part, which might reflect respondents' concerns about answering such a question honestly.

Our data also show that in particular, people aged 18–29 were over-represented among the protesters: they made up 28 per cent of the protesters in our sample but only 23 per cent of the overall sample. Moreover, while the protests were led by private-sector workers, significant numbers of people employed in state service sectors—healthcare, education, and culture—were also involved. Better-educated individuals and those living in larger cities were more likely to have participated in the protests. Among the respondents, 11 per cent of men but only 8 per cent of women said they had taken part. There had already been numerous solidarity actions and demonstrations in support of independent candidates in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election; people in their twenties were particularly involved in these events as well.

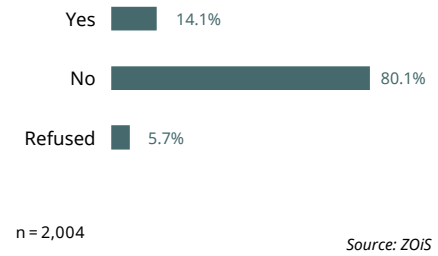
This level of participation is remarkable compared with previous cases of mobilisation. Earlier ZOiS surveys among people aged 16–34 found that around 3 per cent of this age group had participated in earlier protests.<sup>5</sup> Mass protests have a mobilising effect beyond those who actively take part. Nearly half of the respondents in our latest survey stated that they knew someone who had participated in the protests. In particular, men and people living in larger cities are likely to know protesters, as are the better educated and those for whom social media are the main source of information.

## Reasons for protesting

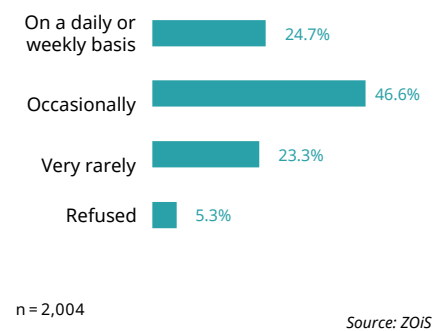
Most people who joined the protests did so right after the contested election in August—or even before it. Only very few protesters—around 10 per cent—got involved in September or later. The election and the regime's harsh response to it brought people onto the streets, and the survey demonstrates how quickly people made up their minds about the country's political situation and whether or not to take part in the protests. Half of the protesters among our respondents described themselves as occasional participants; the others were either very committed weekly or even daily protesters or infrequent participants. ► **FIGURE 4**

The daily protesters did not differ from the overall sample in terms of their age, their gender, or the size of the city they lived in. One distinguishing characteristic of the daily protesters was that they lived by themselves. The frequent demonstrators also indicated that their social trust had increased over the past six months, reflecting the uniting experience of protests.

**FIGURE 3**  
Participation in protests since the presidential election

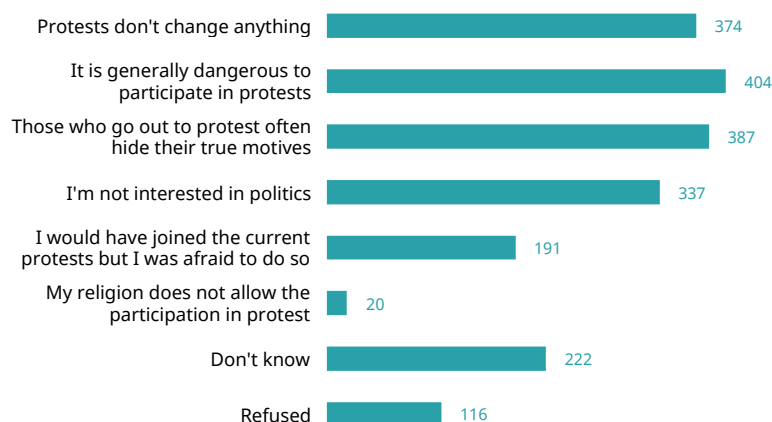


**FIGURE 4**  
How often have you taken part in the protests?



5 Félix Krawatzek, 'Youth in Belarus: Outlook on Life and Political Attitudes', Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), Report 5 / 2019, 24 October 2019, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/youth-in-belarus-outlook-on-life-and-political-attitudes>

FIGURE 5

**Why did you not take part in the current protests?**

Source: ZOIIS

**The most frequent reason for taking part in protests was shock at the violence against protesters.**

The most frequently given reason for taking part in protests was shock at the violence against protesters. This underlines the fact that repression in an age of social media is a risky strategy for an autocratic regime, as the circulation of images of violence may encourage even more people to take to the streets, including the parents and grandparents of the initial injured and arrested protesters. Twenty per cent of respondents reported that they, their family members, or their friends had been directly affected by the violence. Young people and individuals from Minsk and cities in the west of Belarus tended to state more frequently that they had endured state violence.

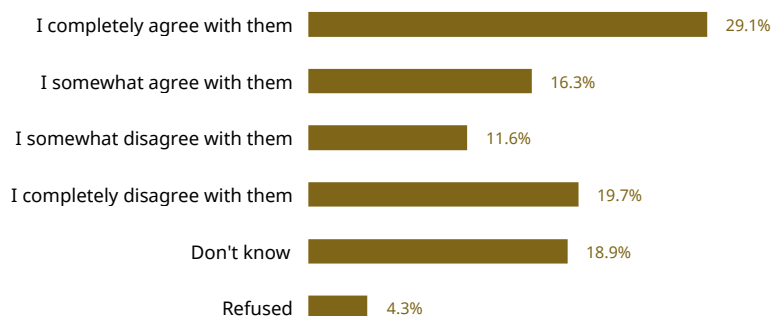
Other motivations for protesting were a wish to have one's voice heard and a desire to demonstrate the unity of the nation. In view of the extremely high levels of state violence, around 40 per cent of the protesters in our sample said they had initially been afraid to join the protests but had gradually lost their fear. About 25 per cent either became more afraid the longer they took part in protests or stopped protesting out of fear. Another quarter of respondents said they had never been afraid to protest.

Reasons for not participating in protests in a context where a significant part of society is mobilised are also telling. The data allow for a distinction between three groups. First, some people clearly opposed the protests, either because they believed that protesters often hide their true motives or because they thought that protests do not change anything. Second, some respondents underlined their fear of participating in the protests and said that they would have wanted to get involved. A third group declared that they were simply not interested in politics. ► FIGURE 5



FIGURE 6

How do you view the ongoing protests against the result of the election?



n = 2,004

Source: ZOiS

### Varied views on the protests

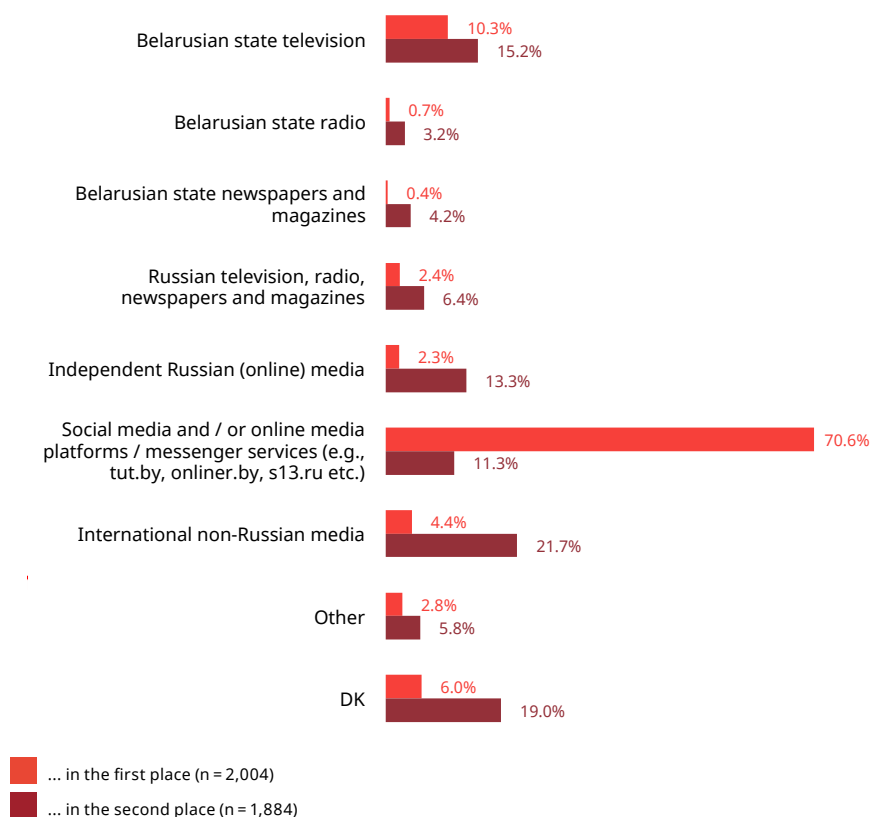
Belarusians' views on the protests are divided, highlighting that the opposition movement has not been able to unite all of the frustration with the regime. ► **FIGURE 6** Twenty-nine per cent of respondents stated that they completely agreed with the protesters' demands, but another 20 per cent completely disagreed, while 19 per cent had no opinion. The number of people who agreed with the protests was lower than the number who felt frustrated with the regime.

Nevertheless, the data show widespread agreement with the nonviolent strategy chosen by the protesters. More than half of respondents supported such a strategy, and only around 5 per cent said they would have wanted the protests to be either a little more or significantly more radical. A large share of those surveyed, however, did not know how to answer this question.

### A highly politicised society

Beyond participation in protests, the overall level of societal politicisation in Belarus is high. Fifty-seven per cent of survey respondents reported an increase in their level of political interest in recent months. This trend is not driven by the younger generation, as higher age correlated with a higher degree of self-reported political interest. In particular, people in urban settings reported that their political interest had gone up, whereas this was less likely among those who self-identified as religious.

**FIGURE 7**  
**Main source of information**



Source: ZOiS

## A further trigger for societal politicisation was the mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A further trigger for wider societal politicisation was the mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic by the Belarusian authorities since spring 2020. The largest group of survey respondents, 45 per cent, opposed the president's decision not to introduce any Covid-19-related restrictions. More than half of them supported targeted measures such as school and restaurant closures, and 41 per cent backed a full lockdown. The 31 per cent of respondents who thought it was the right decision not to close down the economy gave almost exclusively economic reasons for holding this view.

Belarusians' overall politicisation is also apparent in their patterns of news consumption. ► **FIGURE 7** More than 70 per cent of respondents reported that they got most of their information from social media and online media platforms. Only about 10 per cent said they turned to state media outlets as their main source of information. Lower age is not a substantial driver of social media use; rather, support for Tsikhanouskaya, low trust in Lukashenka, and an increase in political interest are the most important factors. Higher levels of education and a lack of religiosity further underpin this trend, whereas people's gender and city size play no significant statistical role in their means of news consumption.

Unsurprisingly, private-sector employees—among them, those in the information technology (IT) sector—are more likely to be social media users.

Turning to social and online media sources is not the same as endorsing pro-democracy views, but a shift away from state media highlights a loss of trust in their reporting and leaves a wide-open space for alternative information that can shape public perceptions. This turn to alternative sources of information also implies a more active engagement with the political world, rather than passive reliance on state media.

## The peripheral roles of trade unions, civil society, and churches

Beyond the initial trigger of electoral fraud and the politicisation of Belarusian society, civil society has played a notable but, compared with past protests, less significant role in Belarus's ongoing protest movement. While organised civil society and political parties took a back seat, trade unions were active in the organisation of strikes and churches for the first time spoke up and expressed support for the protests.

### Independent trade unions

Since August 2020, economic strikes have put additional pressure on the ruling regime in Belarus. Several independent trade union leaders have been arrested, as they were among those calling for a general strike. Trade unions are traditionally very present in Belarusian society. In our sample, almost half of respondents, in particular older people and state employees, were members of a trade union.

Almost half of respondents were members of a trade union.

In September 2020, the Coordination Council, a nongovernmental body set up to enable a democratic transfer of power, created a working group and the platform "ProfSoyuz Online". The aim was to encourage the formation of new independent unions and help people leave the state-run union to join an independent one.<sup>6</sup> However, membership in an independent trade union under the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Unions was still a marginal occurrence in our sample: only 1.5 per cent of respondents fell into this category. Yet, these members are more politically active than those who belong to the state-loyal Federation of Trade Unions.

### Organised civil society and formal opposition

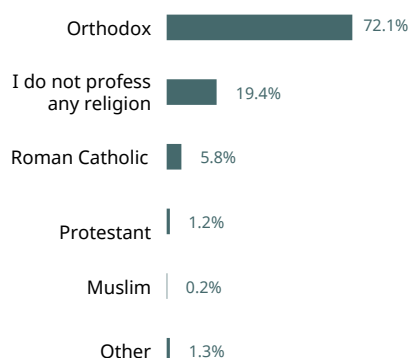
Organised civil society and formal opposition parties played a peripheral role in 2020, compared with previous protests. The marginalisation of Belarus's weak political opposition over the years has shaped the country's political culture. Eventually, that has led to more decentralised activism and protests being driven mainly by grassroots activists and the distinct phenomenon of "individual activism".

6 Coordination Council, 'Trade Union Online Helps Create New Primary Organisations in 20 Cities' 21 October 2020, <https://rada.vision/en/trade-union-online-helps-create-new-primary-organisations-in-20-cities>.

Only about 4 per cent of respondents indicated that they had worked for a nongovernmental organisation or a political party. Asked whether they were members or supporters of a charity or humanitarian agency, a human or civil rights organisation, or a self-help body dealing with Covid-19, respondents again revealed a negligible membership rate, although 11 per cent on average reported that they would support such organisations.

### A new visibility for churches

**FIGURE 8**  
**What is your religion**



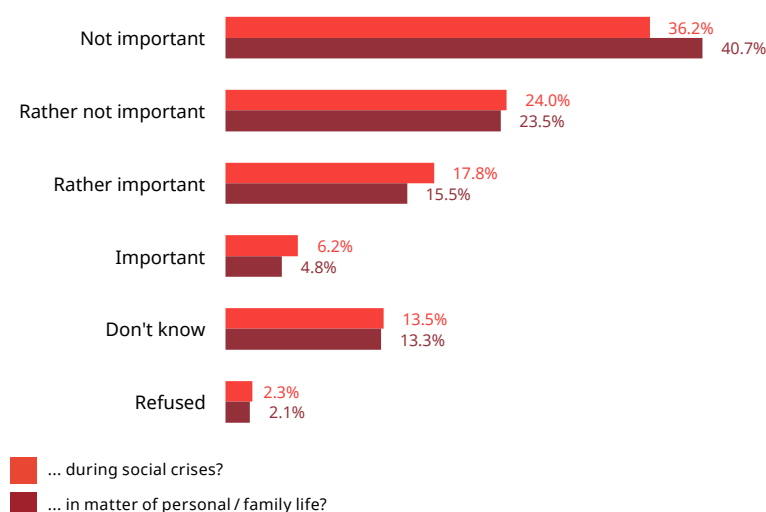
Source: ZOiS

The 2020 protests had a visible religious component, unlike earlier political demonstrations. The Belarusian Orthodox Church represents the largest religious community in Belarus, with 72 per cent of respondents declaring themselves to be Orthodox. ► **FIGURE 8** The second-largest religious community is the Roman Catholic Church, with which about 6 per cent of respondents identified. Both churches had mostly kept quiet about state repression in the past, but before and after the 2020 election, the faithful, priests, and bishops publicly expressed their support for the protests. As a result, the churches experienced massive pressure from the regime: the heads of both churches were removed, and several Orthodox priests were suspended.

According to the survey, followers of the Orthodox Church participated in protests much less than the general population, reflecting the deliberately apolitical and regime-supportive attitude of the institution. Yet, religion in general does not play a significant role in individual decisions to take part in protests. The relevance of official teaching for both the personal and the social lives of the faithful and the Belarusian population as a whole is low.

► **FIGURE 9** The political mobilisation across society also affected those who self-identify as Orthodox: the general increase in political interest applied to them, too. Asked about the forms of solidarity action they had participated in, believers showed no special religious rationale or format; public prayers were the most marginal form of protest in which the faithful were engaged.

**FIGURE 9**  
**How important is the opinion of religious leaders for you?**



n = 2,004

Source: ZOiS

## Low interpersonal and institutional trust

To investigate the state of societal relations in Belarus today, our survey explored the levels of trust that Belarusians feel towards each other and their country's institutions. Confidence in both is low, and negative attitudes towards the latter have partly been amplified by widespread state violence and concerning levels of fear among the population.

### Interpersonal trust

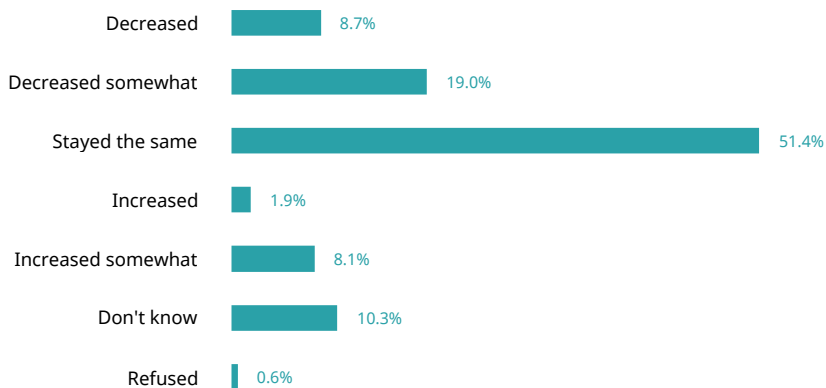
Belarusian society has for a long time been characterised by low social trust, a common feature of authoritarian regimes.<sup>7</sup> Our survey data confirm that social or interpersonal trust is markedly weak in Belarus. Over 60 per cent of respondents indicated that they 'hardly ever' or 'never' trust people they meet for the first time. Studies have identified social trust as a prerequisite for participation in protests.<sup>8</sup> In 2020, Belarusians' willingness to protest increased dramatically. Many authors analysing the events of 2020 and the ongoing protests have written about a 'new national consolidation', 'networks of solidarity', and a 'new social identity'.<sup>9</sup> ► **FIGURE 10**

**Social trust is markedly weak in Belarus.**

According to the survey, almost 30 per cent of respondents said their trust had 'decreased' or 'somewhat decreased' in the past six months, while only about 10 per cent said it had 'increased' or 'somewhat increased'. Social trust has risen in particular among men, residents of Minsk oblast, and people

**FIGURE 10**

**Would you say that your trust in people you meet for the first time increased or decreased during the past six months?**



n = 2,004

Source: ZOIS

7 Roger Sapsford and Pamela Abbott, 'Trust, confidence and social environment in post-communist societies', *Communist and Post-Communist Societies* 39, no. 1 (2006): pp. 59 – 71.

8 Michelle Benson and Thomas Rochon, 'Interpersonal trust and the magnitude of protest: a micro- and macro-level approach', *Comparative Political Studies* 37, no. 4 (2004): pp. 435 – 457.

9 See Ryhor Astapenia, 'Amid the crisis, Belarusian identity is changing', Chatham House, 30 November 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/amid-crisis-belarusian-identity-changing>; Nadja Douglas, 'Belarus: From the old social contract to a new social identity', ZOIS Report 6 / 2020, 9 November 2020, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/belarus-from-the-old-social-contract-to-a-new-social-identity>; Alenia Minchenia and Nadzeya Husakouskaya, 'For many people in Belarus, change has already happened', *Open Democracy*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/many-people-belarus-change-has-already-happened/>.

who identify with the Belarusian language (considering it their native language and wishing to speak it more in public). Respondents who had taken part in protests, who had become more politically interested in the last six months, or who were strong critics of the regime because of their high levels of trust in the Coordination Council also reported that their interpersonal trust had increased.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, these people have been more affected than others by state violence. These respondents' experience of solidarity during the protests made them aware that they were not alone, increasing their confidence in like-minded citizens. Strong supporters of the regime, meanwhile, reported declining levels of societal trust.

### An erosion of institutional trust

Indicative of a dysfunctional relationship between the state and society is growing dissatisfaction with the ruling regime. Trust in public officials (siloviki) and the entire political class has been low for some time.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, distrust of the Belarusian president has also come to the fore because of several unpopular initiatives, including a decree on preventing so-called social parasitism, which effectively sanctioned the unemployed, and the de facto abolition of deferrals for young men drafted for conscription. The context of extremely low trust ratings provided a motivation for many citizens to support alternative candidates in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election.

The pronounced distrust of the security apparatus and the judiciary reflects their unprecedented use of violence.

The ZOiS survey confirms the growing unpopularity not only of the president but also of general state power structures that are increasingly associated with the head of state: the police, including the OMON/AMAP riot police, the national intelligence agency KGB, and the judicial system. These structures have become 'distrusted' or 'somewhat distrusted' by more than half of respondents. ► **FIGURE 11** The pronounced distrust of the security apparatus and the judiciary reflects these bodies' unprecedented use of physical and psychological violence. Trust in these institutions is generally lower among men, people with lower household incomes but higher levels of education, and residents of Minsk oblast. In addition, distrust is particularly notable among people who have become more politically interested in recent months.

The Orthodox Church emerges as the most trusted institution in Belarus, with about 40 per cent of respondents fully or somewhat trusting it. This signifies a fall in trust of about 25 per cent compared with a 2015 survey.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the Coordination Council receives mixed trust scores. Around one-quarter of respondents could not specify their level of trust in this fluid institution. Nevertheless, one-third of respondents said that they fully or somewhat trusted the council, although another 41 per cent expressed no trust in it. These findings illustrate that the Belarusian population has lost trust in the country's institutions but not yet in politics in general.

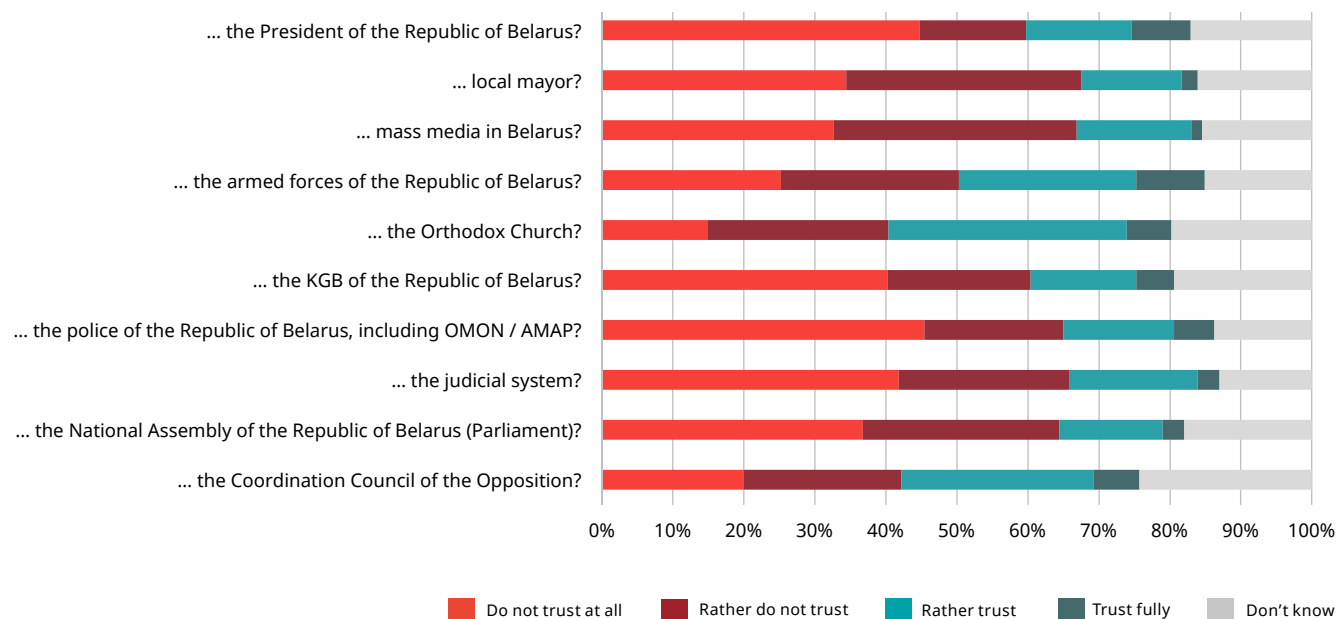
10 Félix Krawatzek, 'How united is Belarus against the regime?', Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), Spotlight 6 / 2021, 17 February 2021, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/zois-spotlight/how-united-is-belarus-against-the-regime/>.

11 Svetlana Kulesh, 'Grashdanskoe obshchestvo v Belarusi: doverie i uchastie naseleniya, osobnosti vsaimodeistviya s gosudarstvom', SYMPA / BIPART, 2018, [http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/civil\\_society\\_research\\_2018.pdf](http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/civil_society_research_2018.pdf).

12 'Negative dynamics of trust to institutes', Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 2015, <http://www.iisepts.org/?p=1489>.

FIGURE 11

## To what extent do you trust...



n = 2,004

Source: ZOIS

## State violence and fear

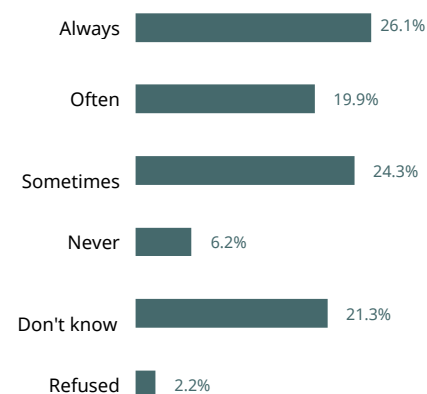
Widespread personal experiences of disproportionate state-induced violence affect how people think about their country's leadership. In our survey, 70 per cent of respondents reported being 'very concerned' or 'rather concerned' about the actions of the security forces during the protests. People in the capital and those with low household incomes but high levels of education expressed more concern.

Violence is not a new phenomenon in Belarus. Asked how frequently the security forces used violence before 2020 to suppress opposition, the largest group of respondents—26 per cent—answered 'always', while 44 per cent acknowledged that the security forces were 'often' or 'sometimes' used to suppress dissent. ► FIGURE 12 In particular, respondents who had taken an active part in protests shared this view. As of 2021, much of the violent repression of citizens has shifted from the streets to pre-trial detention centres and the criminal prosecution system.<sup>13</sup>

Protests are usually framed in the language of rights. Asked which rights they considered most important, the majority of respondents opted for 'the right to physical integrity and personal security'. Political rights came second and, somewhat surprisingly, socio-economic rights were mentioned

FIGURE 12

## How often did authorities use security forces before 2020 to suppress dissent?

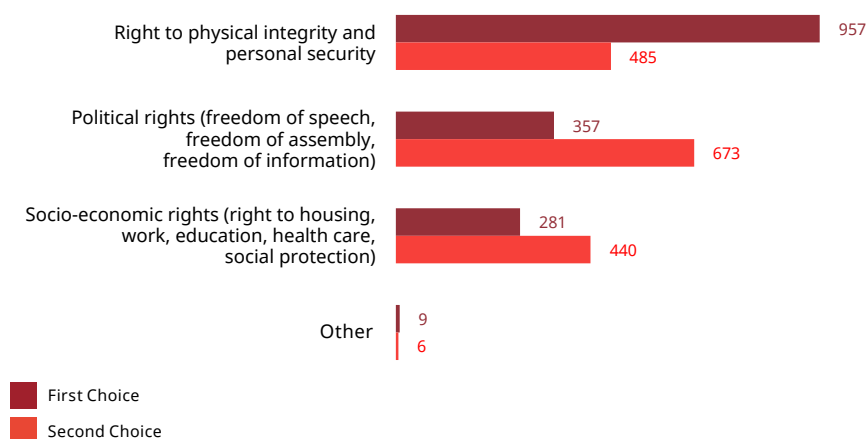


n = 2,004

Source: ZOIS

13 Human Rights Center 'Viasna', Human Rights Situation in Belarus: February 2021, <http://spring96.org/en/news/102245>.

FIGURE 13

**Which rights are most important to you personally?**

Source: ZOiS

last. ► **FIGURE 13** Notable triggers for past protests were socio-economic grievances, for example the law on ‘social parasitism’, and political rights, such as the right to free and fair elections. The unprecedented level of police violence and continued brutality in pre-trial detention centres and prisons in recent months are clearly reflected in current conceptions of rights.

## National symbols

The ongoing protest movement has highlighted several cleavages in Belarusian society that relate to fundamental elements of national identity. Two particular issues stand out: flags and language.

### Red-green vs. white-red-white flags

The 2020 protests started without any reference to national flags, but quickly the colours red and white—those of the flag of the early post-Soviet independent state of Belarus—came to symbolise opposition to the regime, which subsequently banned displays of the colours. During the first month of the demonstrations, white-red-white flags were present alongside the current red-green flag, which was reintroduced from the Soviet period in 1995. The use of the two flags side by side was meant to symbolise the inclusiveness of the protest movement and of Belarusian identity more generally.

Our survey shows ambivalence about the true national colours of the Belarusian state: about 41 per cent of respondents said that the red-green flag was most suitable, 36 per cent chose the white-red-white standard, and 20 per cent could not choose between the two.



These preferences fall into distinct categories along political fault lines: women; respondents from smaller cities; employees in the government sector, the police, or the military; less educated individuals; followers of the Orthodox Church; and people who described their identity as ‘Russian’ were more likely to favour the current red-green flag. Respondents in these categories also exhibited higher trust in the Lukashenka regime.

Both flags are associated with a sense of national unity, but the white-red-white flag, which harks back to Belarus’s brief period of independence after World War I, is seen more as a symbol of hope, a new political beginning, and the continuation of Belarusian independence. Meanwhile, more respondents described the red-green flag as both the true national colours of Belarus and the preservation of Soviet heritage.

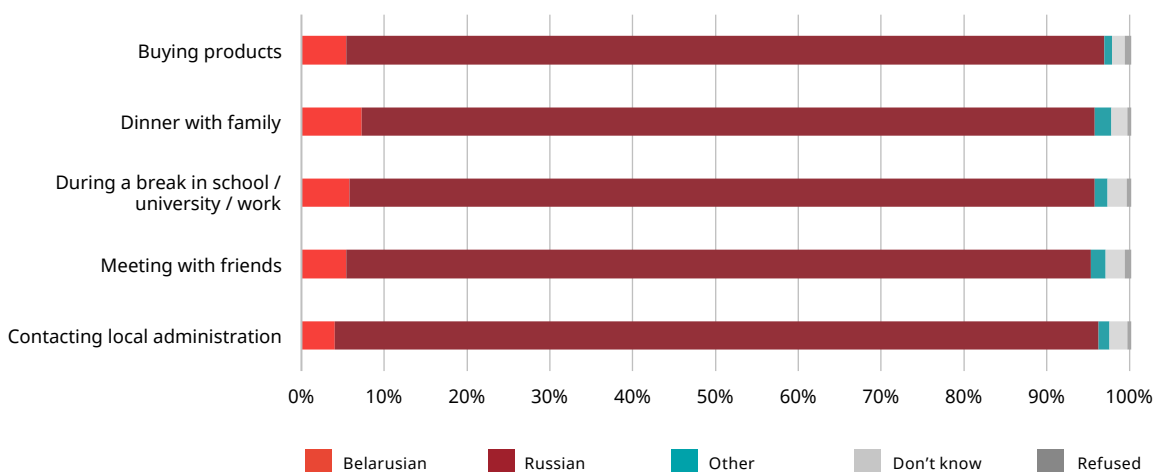
### The desire for a bilingual identity

The Russian language clearly dominates public life in Belarus. ► **FIGURE 14** Nevertheless, when asked about their native language—a symbolic category that is not the same as the language actually spoken in public or private life—47 per cent of respondents named Russian as their native language, and about 41 per cent considered both Belarusian and Russian their native languages. Bilingualism was more prominent among younger people, followers of the Orthodox Church and, even more so, the Protestant and Catholic Churches, and those who expressed a desire to speak more Belarusian in public. The latter finding indicates that the wish for more space for the Belarusian language sits comfortably with a bilingual identity. Only 12 per cent of respondents defined Belarusian as their native language. They were more likely to be male and more urban.

A large majority of respondents mostly spoke Russian, but the Belarusian language carried a certain symbolic value, which was particularly high among politically interested and social media-savvy respondents.

**FIGURE 14**

**What language would you spontaneously speak in the following situations:**

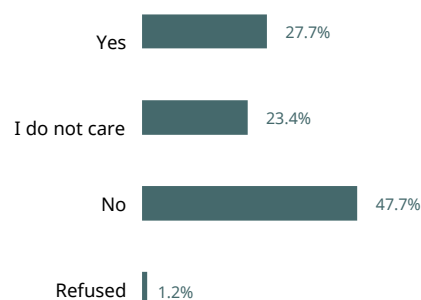


n = 2,004

Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 15

**Would you like to speak more Belarusian in public?**



n = 2,004

Source: ZOiS

About a third of those surveyed expressed a wish to speak more Belarusian in public, whereas about 48 per cent did not, and some 23 per cent did not care about this issue. ► **FIGURE 15** With the exception of age, which did not shape the answers to this question, the socio-demographic profiles of those who want to speak more Belarusian in public were similar to those of respondents who said Belarusian was their sole native language. Additionally, people who said they had become more interested in politics in recent months were more likely to voice this desire.

## Democracy and economic values

Belarus's political awakening has thrown up many questions about what sort of country Belarusians want to live in. To set recent events in the broader context of the general political and economic development of Belarus, our survey explored how citizens understand democracy and perceive the role of state intervention in social issues.

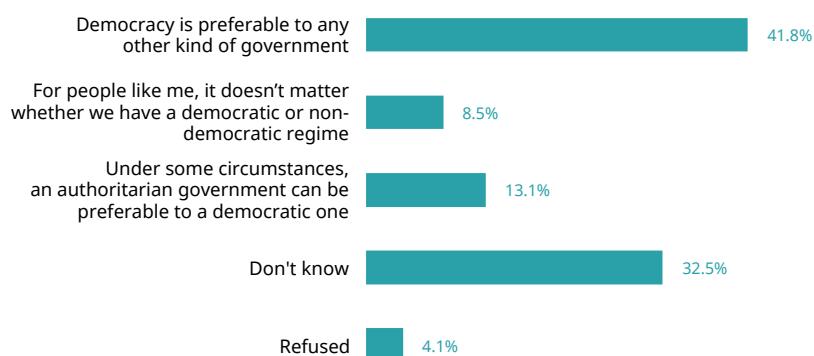
### Support for democracy and views on the regime

Answers to the survey questions on support for democracy reveal a mixed picture. Nearly 42 per cent of respondents preferred democracy to any other kind of government; only 13 per cent explicitly stated that an authoritarian government was sometimes preferable to democracy; 9 per cent said that the type of government did not matter to them.

Nearly one-third of those surveyed did not know how to answer the question about their preferred form of government (► **FIGURE 16**), suggesting that the concept of democracy may be too abstract for them. Younger, female, and less educated individuals who rarely use social media were more likely to fall into this category, as were those living in smaller cities who had no personal experience of, or support for, protests.

FIGURE 16

**Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?**



n = 2,004

Source: ZOiS

Respondents who did not know what type of government they preferred shared similarities with those who believed that an autocracy was sometimes preferable to a democracy. In particular, they tended to be male, be less likely to use social media, and have no personal experience of protests. Respondents who preferred an autocracy were also more likely to oppose the protests and trust the president than those who could not make a clear choice for a particular type of government.

Democracy supporters, by contrast, were more likely than other groups to have experience of protests or, at least, a supportive attitude towards them. Male respondents were also more likely to support democracy. Further, this group tended to include those who live in bigger cities, are better educated, use social media, and are not Orthodox.

**Protesters are more likely to support democracy.**

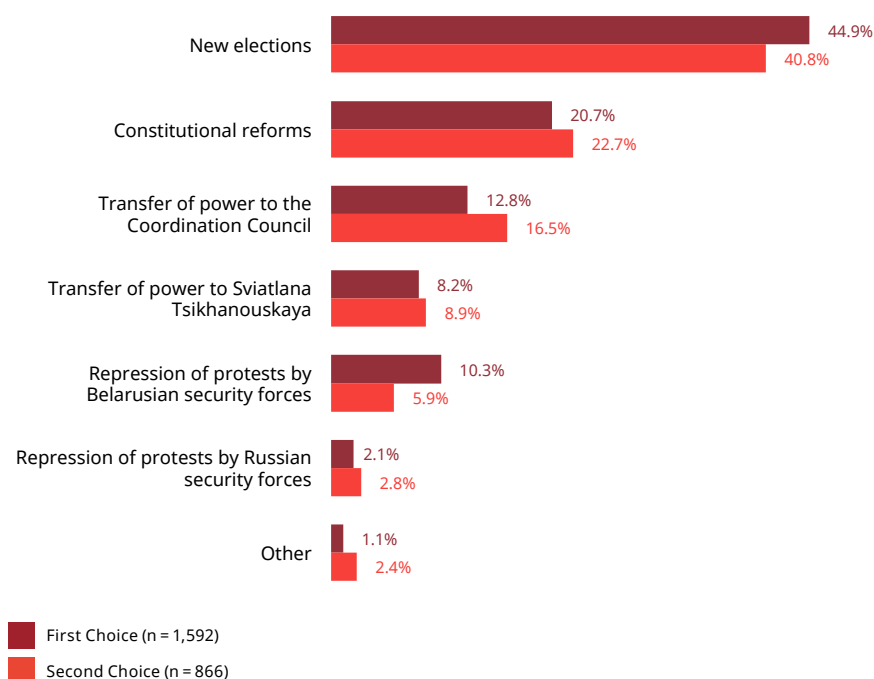
In sum, our data suggest that protesters are more likely to support democracy, while people who sometimes prefer an autocratic form of government support the incumbent regime. Those who cannot make a clear choice for or against democracy are slightly more supportive of Lukashenko. Thus, the presence of an ideational vacuum among more than 30 per cent of respondents may contribute to stabilising Belarus's existing regime.

### A liberal understanding of democracy

Despite the abstract nature of democracy for some Belarusians, our data convey that people have strong expectations of concrete political changes, such as 'new elections'. ► **FIGURE 17** and 'giving citizens a real voice in the political

**FIGURE 17**

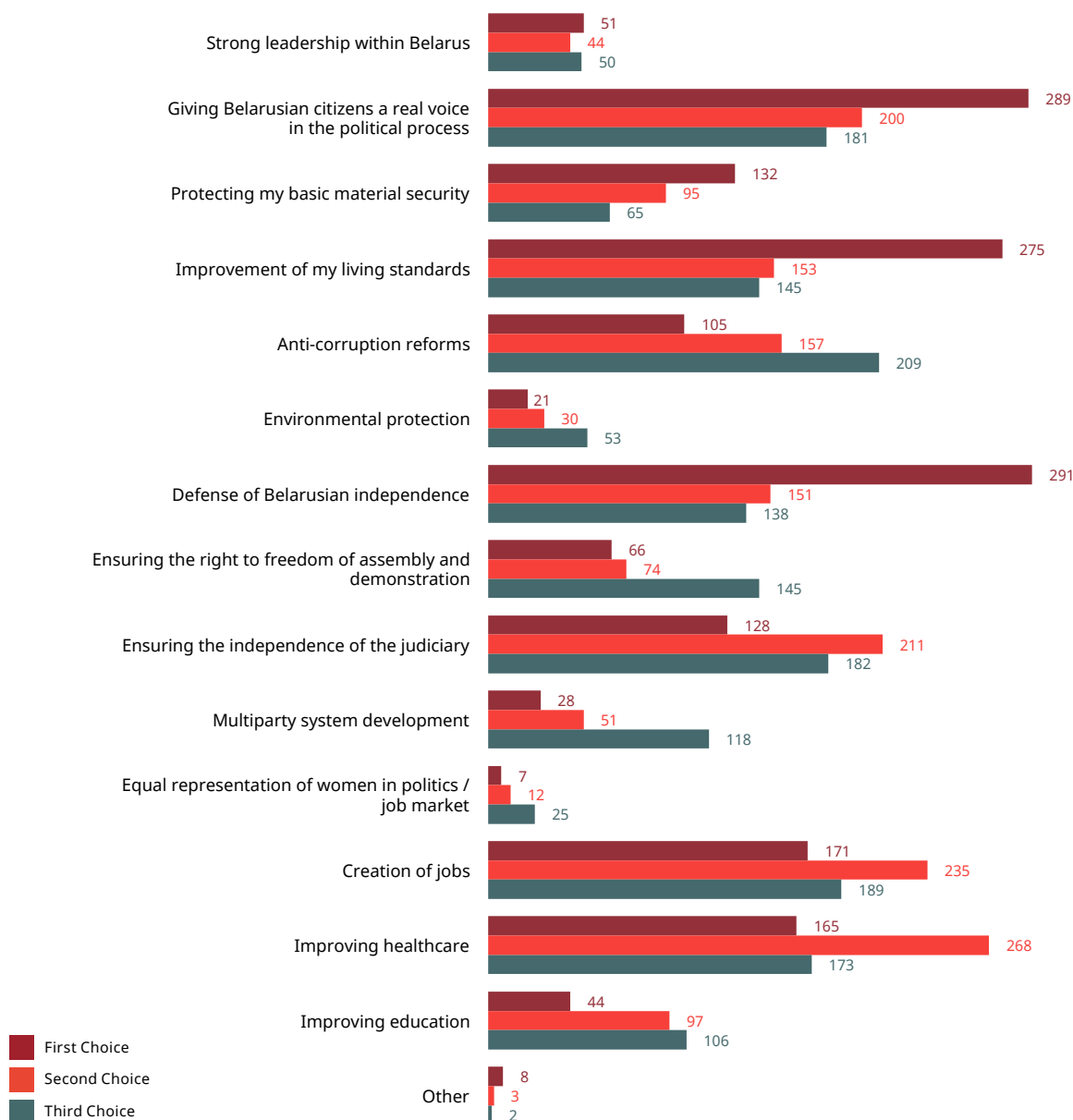
**What outcome of the country's current political crisis do you support mostly?**



Source: ZOIS

FIGURE 18

## What should be the three main priorities of the political leadership after the crisis?

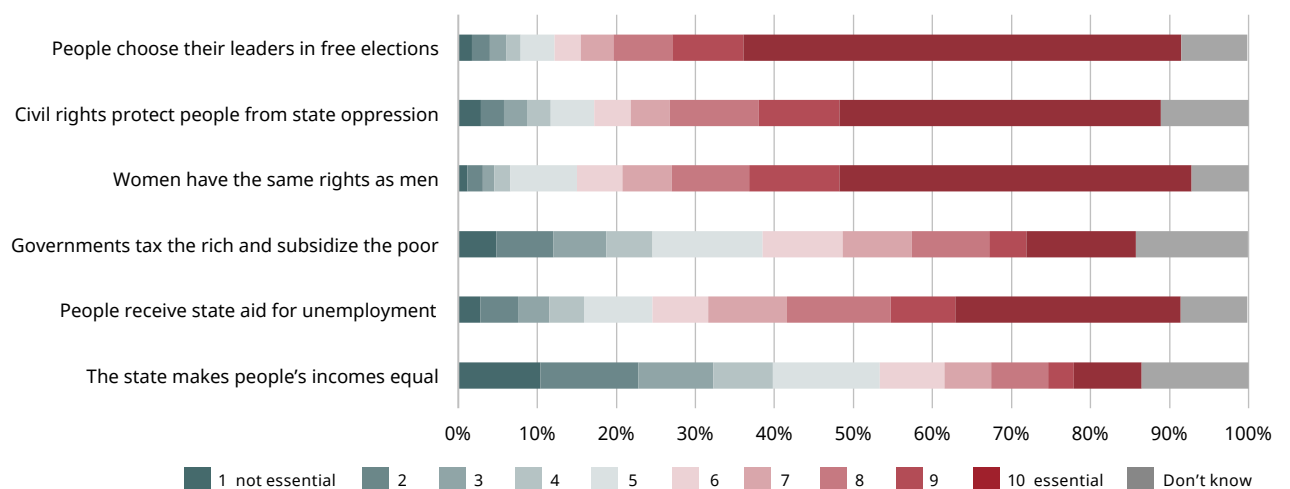


Source: ZOIIS

process'. ► **FIGURE 18** To differentiate between a liberal and an egalitarian understanding of democracy, we asked respondents to identify what they saw as the essential characteristics of democracy. A liberal understanding emphasises civil liberties and the rule of law. An egalitarian understanding, meanwhile, considers the fight against socio-economic inequalities as essential for a democracy, because their presence is seen as a major impediment to the exercise of political rights and civil liberties.<sup>14</sup>

14 Michael Coppedge, Staffan Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, 'Measuring high level democratic principles using the V-Dem Data', working paper 6, Varieties of Democracy Institute, May 2015.

FIGURE 19

**Essential characteristics of democracy**

Source: ZOIS

Most respondents put a strong emphasis on liberal components of democracy. They associated a democratic form of government with the protection of political and civil rights, such as free elections (79 per cent), civil rights (72 per cent), and women's rights (78 per cent).<sup>15</sup> ► **FIGURE 19** Fewer respondents stressed the egalitarian elements of democracy and linked a democratic political system with a more interventionist role for the state in guaranteeing social security and equality, for example by making people's incomes equal (33 per cent), providing state aid for the unemployed (67 per cent), or taxing the rich and subsidising the poor (54 per cent).<sup>16</sup> This trend was also reflected in respondents' greater appreciation of political versus socio-economic rights. ► **FIGURE 13**

Democracy supporters tend to associate a democratic political system with both liberal and egalitarian components. In the survey, egalitarian elements also tended to be chosen by respondents who preferred an autocracy under certain circumstances, although with a lower likelihood than by democracy supporters. Those who had no preference for a particular type of government tended to define neither egalitarian nor liberal components as essential characteristics of democracy. This finding provides further evidence of the fact that this group has difficulties in pinpointing what democracy means to them. Underlining this difficulty, 11 per cent of respondents either answered 'don't know' or refused to answer when asked to define the essential characteristics of democracy.

15 Percentages include all respondents who chose a number from 6 to 10 on a scale from 1 (non-essential) to 10 (essential) when asked how they valued the following statements: 'People choose their leaders in free elections', 'Civil rights protect people from state oppression', 'Women have the same rights as men'.

16 Percentages include all respondents who chose a number from 6 to 10 on a scale from 1 (non-essential) to 10 (essential) when asked how they valued the following statements: 'The state makes people's incomes equal', 'People receive state aid for unemployment', 'Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor' (► **FIGURE 19**).

## Market competition and state intervention in social issues

The economic situation in Belarus has been strained for some time. Insecurities about the future of energy subsidies have increased the dependence of the dominant oil-refining industry on Russia. The trends in Belarus's external trade and exports are negative, the country's budget deficit is growing, and its external debt remains high. The Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing political crisis have amplified many of these problems for households, too. The Belarusian authorities have failed to address the underlying structural causes of these problems and their effects on Belarusian citizens.

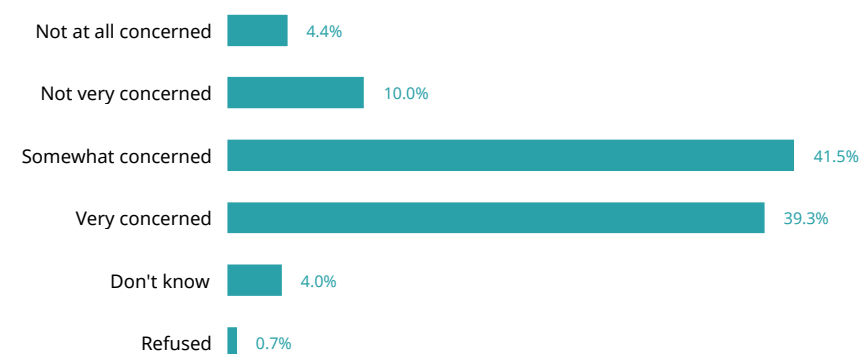
Past survey data have illustrated that the perception of a worsening socio-economic situation in Belarus is reflected in particular in concerns about individual household incomes.<sup>17</sup> The latest ZOiS survey confirms that over 80 per cent of respondents were 'very concerned' or 'somewhat concerned' about what would happen to their personal finances over the next six months. ► **FIGURE 20** For example, more than 30 per cent of respondents mentioned a fear of losing their job among major concerns about the economic development of the country in case of a change in government.

Over 80% were concerned about their personal finances in the next six months.

Against this background, it is interesting to see how Belarusians think about state-market relations. Our survey reveals a slight preference among respondents for liberal economic values, despite the widely assumed paternalist nature of the Belarusian state under Lukashenka.<sup>18</sup> More precisely, clear majorities of those surveyed supported competition (70 per cent) and private ownership (67 per cent). There was also backing for greater individual responsibility in general, but at the lower rate of 52 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

**FIGURE 20**

**How concerned are you about how your personal finances will develop over the next six months?**



n = 2,004

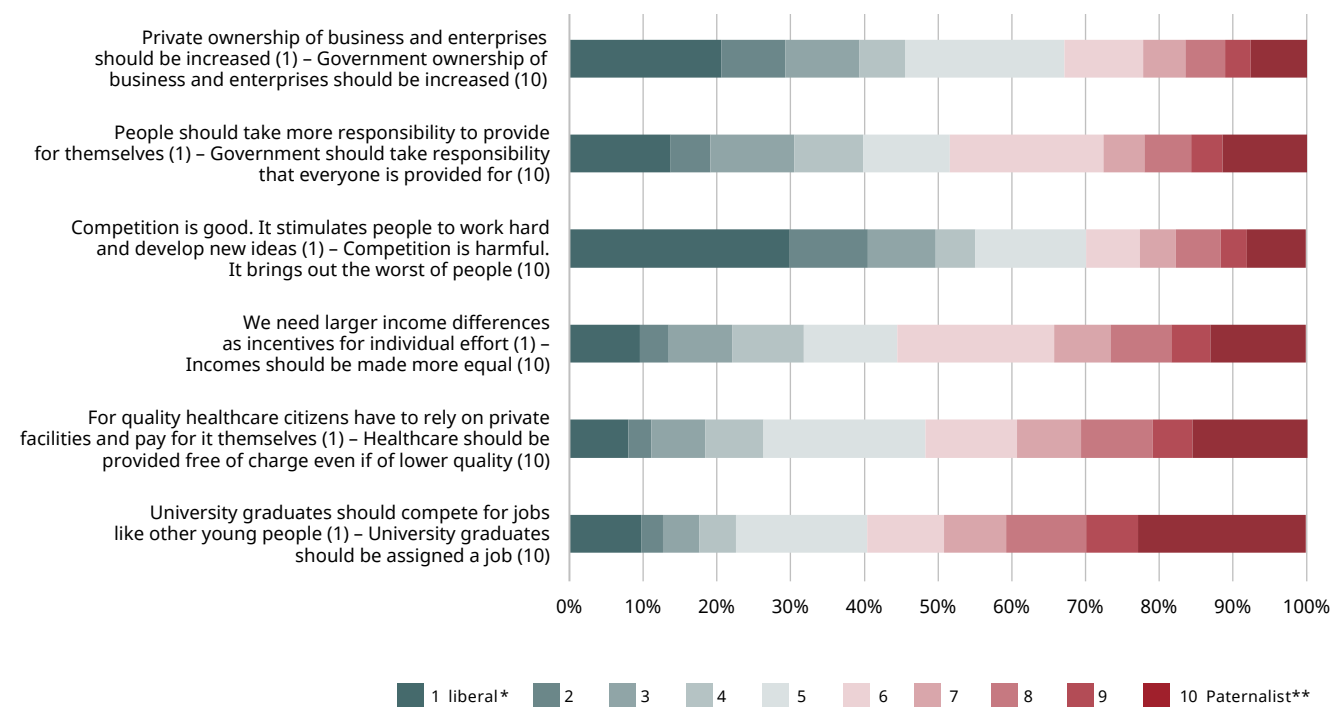
Source: ZOiS

17 'Belorusy otsenili, kak stali zhit' vo vremya epidemii. Novoe issledovanie Vardomatskogo', Belsat, 29 April 2020, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/belorusy-otsenili-kak-stali-zhit-vo-vremya-epidemii-novoe-issledovanie-var-domatskogo/>

18 Kiryl Haiduk, Elena Rakova, and Vital Silitski, eds, *Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus* (St Petersburg: Nevsky Prostor, 2009); Alexei Pikulik, 'Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine as Post-Soviet Rent-Seeking Regimes', in *Stubborn Structures: Reconceptualizing Postcommunist Regimes*, edited by Bálint Magyar (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019), pp. 489 – 506.

19 Percentages include all respondents who chose a number from 1 to 5 on a scale from 1 (corresponding to strongly liberal) to 10 (corresponding to strongly paternalist) when asked to describe their attitude towards these statements (► **FIGURE 21**).

**FIGURE 21**  
**Views on economic issues**



\*, \*\* The categories "liberal" and "paternalist" were not used in the survey. They were introduced ex post for analytical purposes.

Source: ZOIS

When asked about their attitudes towards state intervention in issues of social security and inequality, most respondents preferred stronger intervention. However, approval rates on these issues were lower than for greater economic freedoms: less than 52 per cent of respondents supported a strong role for the state in providing free healthcare, even at the cost of lower quality. Slightly more than 54 per cent supported intervention in ensuring income equality, while less than 60 per cent expected the state to create job security for university graduates.<sup>20</sup> ► **FIGURE 21**

### Liberal economic values vs. a paternalist state

In the survey, respondents who shared liberal economic values were more likely to have taken part in protests, in particular since summer 2020, or at least to support the ongoing demonstrations. They also tended to support democracy as a form of government. Moreover, these respondents generally considered Belarusian their native language, were better educated, and worked in the private sector, mainly in upper or middle management. By contrast, those who supported stronger state intervention in the economy shared several opposite characteristics.

<sup>20</sup> Percentages include all respondents who chose a number from 6 to 10 on a scale from 1 (corresponding to strongly liberal) to 10 (corresponding to strongly paternalist) when asked to describe their attitude towards these statements (► **FIGURE 21**).

Most Belarusians support market competition and private ownership but regard guarantees of social security and equality as key responsibilities of the state. Those who do not support the ongoing protests are more likely to prefer stronger state intervention in the economy. As this group includes many of those who are undecided as to which political system they wish to live in, this finding has important implications for ways in which the opposition could fill this ideational vacuum.

## International outlook: sanctions and relations with the EU and Russia

### Society is divided on the issue of closer relations with the EU.

The Belarusian protests have avoided any geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis Russia or the European Union (EU). However, the tone of exiled opposition figures, most notably Tsikhanouskaya and her team, has changed towards an explicit call for more Western support for the protest movement. The ZOiS survey shows that Belarusian society is divided on the issue of closer relations with the EU. Although about 39 per cent of respondents favoured stronger ties with the union, 30 per cent did not, and the share of those who did not know how to answer this question was equally high, at about 30 per cent. ► **FIGURE 22**

Younger and more educated respondents, especially students, favoured closer relations with the EU, as did individuals from poorer households. Participation in protests also correlated strongly with a wish for stronger ties with the EU. In fact, protest participation cancels out the significance of a higher level of education, pointing to a wider societal dynamic. Respondents who characterised themselves as religious or had greater trust in Lukashenka were less likely to want closer relations with the EU. Female respondents, those from outside Minsk oblast, those with lower levels of political interest and trust in Tsikhanouskaya were more likely not to know how to answer this question.

**FIGURE 22**

**Should Belarus seek closer cooperation with EU countries, even if it means less close cooperation with Russia?**



n = 2,004

Source: ZOiS



When asked about their expectations of the EU, the largest share of respondents—23 per cent—hoped for easier travel to the union, followed by 19 per cent who expected nothing, about 13 per cent who hoped for financial support, and 11 per cent who wanted to see more support for civil society. Only 5 per cent of respondents mentioned possible EU membership for Belarus.

Lower age correlated with all of these options except for the expectation that the EU will support political reforms in Belarus. Male respondents and those from larger cities were more likely to have expectations about political reforms and EU membership. A self-reported increase in political interest and participation in protests since August 2020 were consistently associated with all expectations of the EU and, in turn, a lower likelihood of being unable to answer this question. A higher degree of politicisation thus makes the EU more prominent in people's minds. Trust in Tsikhanouskaya and participation in protests correlated strongly with all positive expectations of the EU, underlining that the exiled politician now stands for a vision of Belarus that is oriented towards the EU.

Identity issues are also linked to hopes associated with the EU. Although language is not a divisive issue in Belarusian society, respondents who named Belarusian as their native language—rather than said they had a bilingual identity—were more likely to express a hope for financial, political, or civil society support and easier access to the EU. Interestingly, the 15 per cent of respondents who did not know how to answer the question tended to include younger people, women, respondents from poorer households, and those with a lower self-declared interest in politics.

Expectations vis-à-vis the EU are also reflected in the widespread readiness for migration among Belarusian citizens: about half of respondents said that they were considering leaving their city. Of those, about 34 per cent would prefer to move to an EU country, some 14 per cent would move within Belarus, and around 11 per cent were contemplating moving to Russia. Migration intentions are not the same as actual emigration, but they are a powerful measure of the level of dissatisfaction.

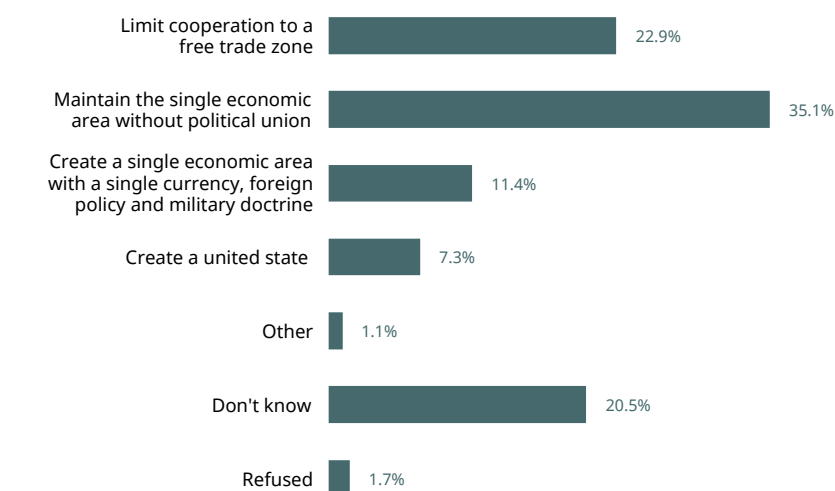
There is a widespread readiness for migration.

It took the EU a while to reach a consensus on sanctions against Lukashenka and the elites closest to him. Some member states, most notably the Baltic states and Poland, implemented bilateral sanctions faster and more comprehensively. The effectiveness of Western sanctions in terms of resolving the political crisis remains unclear. Interestingly, the majority perception among the survey respondents was that sanctions have a significant effect: 52 per cent thought the measures were either 'important' or 'very important'. Only 23 per cent considered them unimportant, and 22 per cent did not know how to judge their value.

While the survey did not ask explicitly about respondents' support for sanctions, the measures' importance can be judged along socio-political fault lines. Those who reported trust in Tsikhanouskaya and an increase in their level of political interest were more likely to deem the sanctions important. Conversely, the sanctions were seen as unimportant in particular by those who had not participated in protests since August 2020, reported higher trust in Lukashenka, and were characterised by socio-demographic factors that underpin regime loyalty more generally: being employed in the government sector, living in smaller cities, being religious and, more specifically,

FIGURE 23

**What form of future collaboration between Belarus and Russia would you prefer?**



n = 2,004

Source: ZOiS

being a follower of the Orthodox Church, and being older (though the age effect is weaker).

Relations with Russia continue to be an important foreign policy axis for Belarusian citizens. But the survey reveals that this relationship is seen primarily in economic terms: 35 per cent of respondents favoured a partnership between Belarus and Russia within a single economic area without a political union, while 23 per cent preferred more general trade cooperation. Only about 11 per cent of respondents supported the notion of closer political and military relations, and just 7 per cent backed the idea of a united state. ► **FIGURE 23** The fact that 21 per cent did not know how to answer the question about relations with Russia suggests respondents' uncertainty or unwillingness to speculate about Belarus's foreign policy orientation.

Respondents who trusted Tsikhanouskaya or had taken part in protests were more likely to support free trade—the loosest type of link—whereas those who trusted Lukashenko were more likely to favour the two options for closer political integration. Thus, the political divide between regime critics and regime loyalists shows a clear geopolitical pattern without either overestimating the EU's role or ignoring the continued importance of good economic relations with Russia.

## Conclusion

The latest ZOiS survey provides insights into the profiles of Belarus's most recent cohort of protesters: overall, they tend to be young, male, living in towns and cities, notably Minsk, and well educated. The Belarusian regime has little to offer this segment of the population, which has been able to reach across society in the context of protests since August 2020, contributing to a profound change in attitudes and a social awakening in the entire country.

The survey maps the considerable degree of societal politicisation beyond participation in the protests. It is here that the medium-term pressure on the Lukashenka regime lies. An increase in self-reported levels of political interest—together with a significant shift towards social and independent online media as people's main sources of information and a general lack of trust in political institutions—will maintain pressure on the regime even if the protests do not regain strength in the coming months. For this wider politicisation, age is not a key determining factor.

Despite this broader politicisation, the new data reveal a societal cleavage in the making between protesters and non-protesters. The former seem to be pro-democratic and have a clear understanding of democracy, but our data show a high degree of uncertainty among non-protesters about the appropriate type of government for Belarus. About a third of the respondents did not know what type of government they preferred and had difficulty defining what democracy meant to them. As this group includes many of those who oppose the ongoing protests and trust Lukashenka, their presence may help stabilise the regime. Their uncertainty about the kind of political system they wish to live in, however, is paired with a strong desire for state intervention in social issues such as the provision of free healthcare, income equality, and job security.

Similarly, geopolitical orientations differ between protesters and non-protesters—or those who trust Tsikhanouskaya and those who back Lukashenka. Closer relations with the EU—though not a path towards membership—and a limit to close economic relations with Russia are preferred by protesters, those who trust Tsikhanouskaya, and those who report higher levels of political interest as a result of developments since August 2020.

Concerns about personal finances and a generally pessimistic outlook are reflected in Belarusians' economic expectations of any new political leadership in terms of overcoming the current political crisis. For example, respondents prioritised the improvement of living standards and the creation of jobs over political reforms.

It is impossible to predict whether the politicisation and societal expectations will lead to a new wave of protests or whether repression will succeed in preventing mobilisation for the time being. But irrespective of mass protest, the changing political attitudes that the survey has been able to identify are remarkable and bound to persist. Belarusian society has changed, even if political change proves more gradual.

## Imprint

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