

BELARUS: PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS AND ADVOCACY

DECEMBER 2016



Funded by
the European Union

Contents

Executive summary	4
Perceptions of and attitudes towards human rights	4
Protecting and promoting the rights of an individual citizen	4
Awareness of human rights organizations and their role in protecting the rights of citizens	4
Methodology	5
Perceptions of Human Rights: Significance of the Problem and Assessment of the Situation in the Country	6
Public Perception on Human Rights: Sources of Authority, Substance, and Institutions Protecting Human Rights	10
Human Rights Violations and Response Measures	14
The State and the Citizen	16
Defending Human Rights: National and International Organizations	19
Human Rights Organizations: Visibility and Recognition of Work	21



This project is funded by
the European Union



© Freedom House

BELARUS:

PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS AND ADVOCACY

Executive Summary

Perceptions of and attitudes towards human rights

A large majority of Belarusians (93.2%) consider human rights to be given at birth, and not acquired; and nearly as many believe that human rights are universal rather than exclusive. However, in other respects public perceptions of human rights are rather vague and contradictory. For example, in the public view, human rights include the notion of obedience to law, national law is regarded as the source of human rights, and public authorities are listed among the subjects of human rights, while human rights defense and advocacy are largely conflated with the work of law enforcement agencies.

Public opinion is divided about the strength of rule of law. Half of those surveyed (50.6%) assesses the human rights situation in Belarus as stable and unchanging. One-third of respondents (29.9%) believe that the overall human rights situation has deteriorated over the past few years, and only 7.0% believe there have been positive developments in this area. Respondents believe that the government is responsible for respecting human rights, but is de facto incapable of providing sufficient guarantees for everyone and, when human rights are violated, is not able to provide the necessary redress. At the same time, around one-half (51.5%) of respondents agree that it is imperative to defend one's own rights, even if it contradicts the interests of the state.

Positive assessments of the human rights situation in Belarus are reflected by the optimistic attitudes towards certain legal and administrative aspects of life in Belarus. The respondents who noted positive developments in the human rights field also believe that injustice is rare, trials of ordinary citizens are fair, all Belarusians are equal before the law, and that people are able to influence government decision-making.

Protecting and promoting the rights of an individual citizen

The level of readiness to stand up for their own rights is not high among Belarusians. About one-third (36.2%) of respondents are aware of where to turn in case of violation of their rights. At the same time, almost half (45.4%) of those Belarusians who had faced infringement of their rights, in reality, did nothing to defend them. The major reason for inaction for this category of citizens was their

disbelief that any actions could help. Citizens also do not actively use the available resources within civil society and human rights organizations to defend their rights; only 6.1% and 7.3% of respondents have contacted them, respectively.

Awareness of human rights organizations and their role in protecting the rights of citizens

Almost two-thirds (62.3%) of Belarusians have not received any information about the work of human rights organizations; another 26.6% have heard something about their activities, but do not have a clear understanding of the organizations. Only 14.5% of Belarusians know about the work of human rights organizations.

The level of legal awareness and the understanding of the balance between the rights of the individual and the interests of the state differ among those who know human rights organizations and those who are not aware about them. For example, among the well-informed respondents, the proportion of citizens who noted their rights have been violated at some point is 2.2 times higher than among those who do not know anything about human rights defenders (HRDs). Those well-informed about the work of human rights organizations favor the rule of law and prioritize the protection of rights of an individual.

The overwhelming majority (96.5%) of Belarusians among those informed about HRDs consider their work necessary and helpful for the society. They believe the main area for human rights organizations is the provision of free legal aid. The well-informed respondents also believe that human rights organizations also focus on defending citizens against government's abuse of power and serve as a last resort in a desperate situation.

According to the majority of respondents (72.0%), human rights organizations are among the top three institutions designed to protect human rights, along with courts and lawyers. However, only 34.8% of respondents view protection of human rights as the human rights defenders' duty.

The level of trust toward human rights organizations is fairly high among all respondents, 60.4% trust such organizations or are neutral about them. At the same time, the effectiveness of these organizations is perceived with more caution; only 23.6% highly rated the impact of their activities (7 to 10 points on a 10-point scale).

Methodology

The sociological research “Features of the Belarusian Sense of Justice: Perceptions and Attitudes towards Human Rights” was conducted by the group of companies “Satio” and comprised quantitative (a national opinion poll) and qualitative (focus group discussions) components.

The quantitative study was conducted from March - May 2016 using face-to-face interviews at the place of residence of the respondents.

The geography of research included urban settlements of 50,000 inhabitants or larger and covered oblast centers, major raion centers with 75,000-100,000 inhabitants or more, and average raion centers with 50,000 inhabitants or more. In Minsk oblast, in accordance with the existing regional-administrative division of the region, three large raion centers were included into the study.

Data collection was based on multilayered sampling. In the first stage, stratified sampling was conducted, proportional to the size of the target audience in each selected location; the second stage included quota sampling with quotas based on age and sex. Route sampling was the selected method for the third stage.

The sample size is 1,000 effective interviews.

The maximum sampling error does not exceed ± 3.1 percentage points for the overall sample. The data are repre-

sentative of the urban population between the ages 18-60 and living in cities of 50,000 inhabitants or larger.

The qualitative study was conducted using the focus group method in November 2015 – February 2016. A total of 6 focus group discussions were conducted, 6-7 participants each. Focus groups were attended by both men and women of different age groups: young (between the ages of 21 and 35), middle age (36-55 years old), and senior (aged 56 and older). Focus group participants were selected based on their engagement in social activities (charity, urban or environmental activism, community organizations, and others). One of the focus group discussions (middle age group) included political activists, which allowed us to compare their ideas on human rights and advocacy with the views of participants not engaged in political activities.

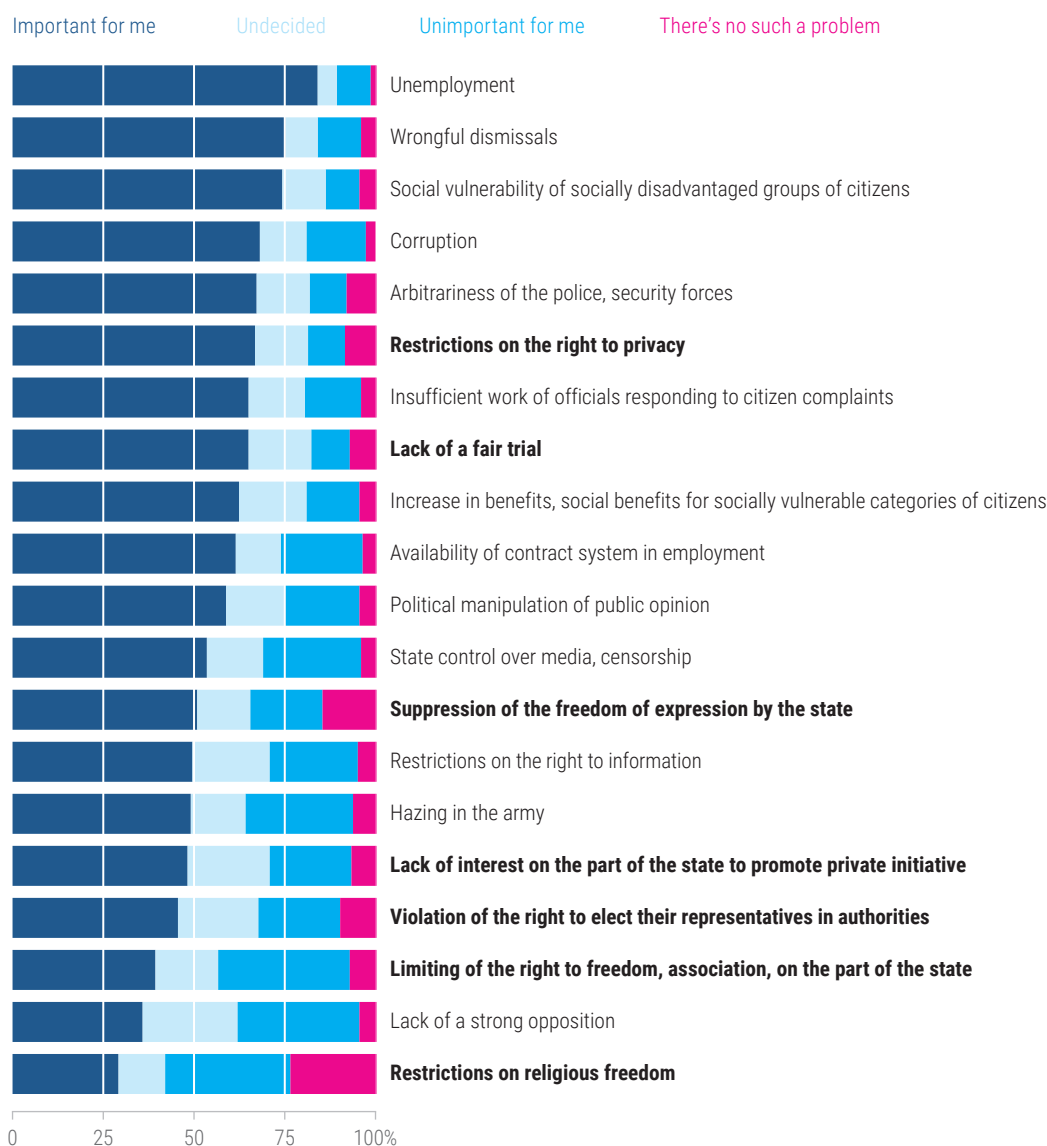
The results of the national polling of “Satio” also include elements of the field research and self-assessment analysis of the Belarusian human rights defenders conducted by independent experts Andrei Yahorau (Belarus) and Andriy Kohut (Ukraine).

Perceptions of Human Rights: Significance of the Problem and Assessment of the Situation in the Country

Human rights violations are not in the top list of the concerns of the public (see Figure 1). Instead, socio-economic problems (unemployment, illegal dismissals, social insecurity) are of the highest concern as well as dissatisfaction with government actions (corruption, arbitrariness of the police, inefficiency of the officials in responding to citizens' complaints). Among the human rights issues, the respon-

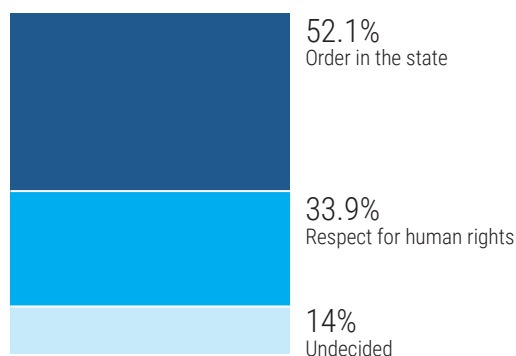
dents are most concerned about restrictions on the right to privacy (66.9%), lack of fair trial (65.0%), suppression of free speech and restrictions on the right to information (51.0%). To a lesser extent, the respondents view as worrisome violations of the election rights (45.7%), restrictions on freedoms of assembly and association (39.2%), as well as on freedom of religion (29.1%).

1. POTENTIAL PROBLEMS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR RESOLUTION



The relatively low importance of human rights issues for Belarusians are also reflected answering the question, "What is more important for the present-day Belarus: to maintain order in the country or to respect human rights?" Only a third of respondents (33.9%) believe that it is now necessary to prioritize human rights, meanwhile 52.1% believe that a state of order is more important for the country (see Figure 2).

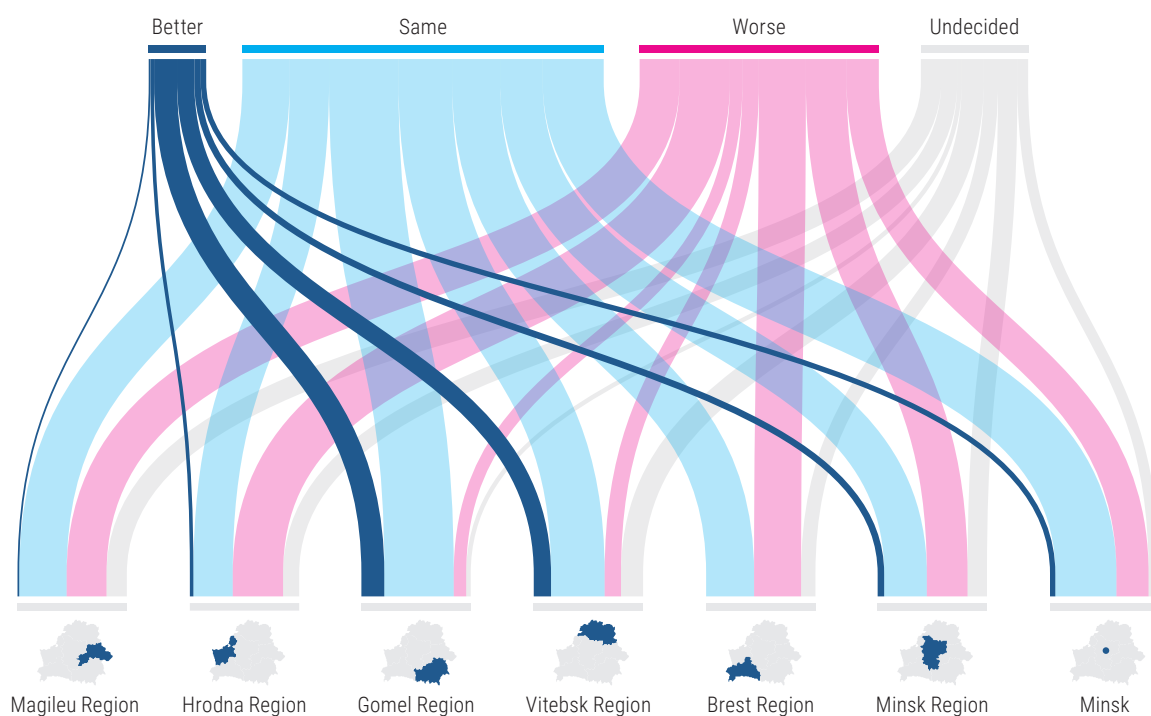
2. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT FOR BELARUS: TO MAINTAIN ORDER OR TO RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS?"



Half of Belarusians (50.6%) believe that the situation of human rights in Belarus has not changed in the past two or three years; 29.9% believe that the situation has deteriorated, and only 7.0% of respondents state that it has changed for the better. Residents of Homel oblast

are the most optimistic in this respect positively assessing the dynamics of the human rights situation in the country. The least optimistic are the respondents of Brest oblast; no positive responses were recorded there (see Figure 3).

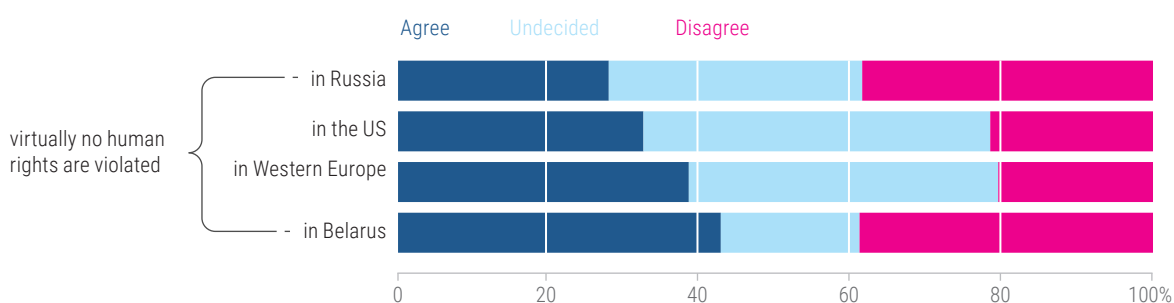
3. OPINION OF BELARUSIANS ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION DYNAMIC IN THE PAST 2-3 YEARS, BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE, IN %



Interestingly, Belarusians are rather confident (44.1%) in the fact that human rights are not violated in their country; meanwhile they believe the countries of Western Europe, the US and Russia to be performing much worse compared to Belarus. At the same time, there is also a higher proportion of respondents who disagree with the statement that human rights are

not violated in Belarus, compared to the similar assessment of the other countries. This contradiction is explained by the fact that Belarusians consider themselves to be more competent in assessing the situation just in their own country; a significant proportion of responses were undecided vis-à-vis other regions (from 36.6% to 43.6%).

4. DISTRIBUTION OF BELARUSIANS' OPINIONS ON THE OBSERVANCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

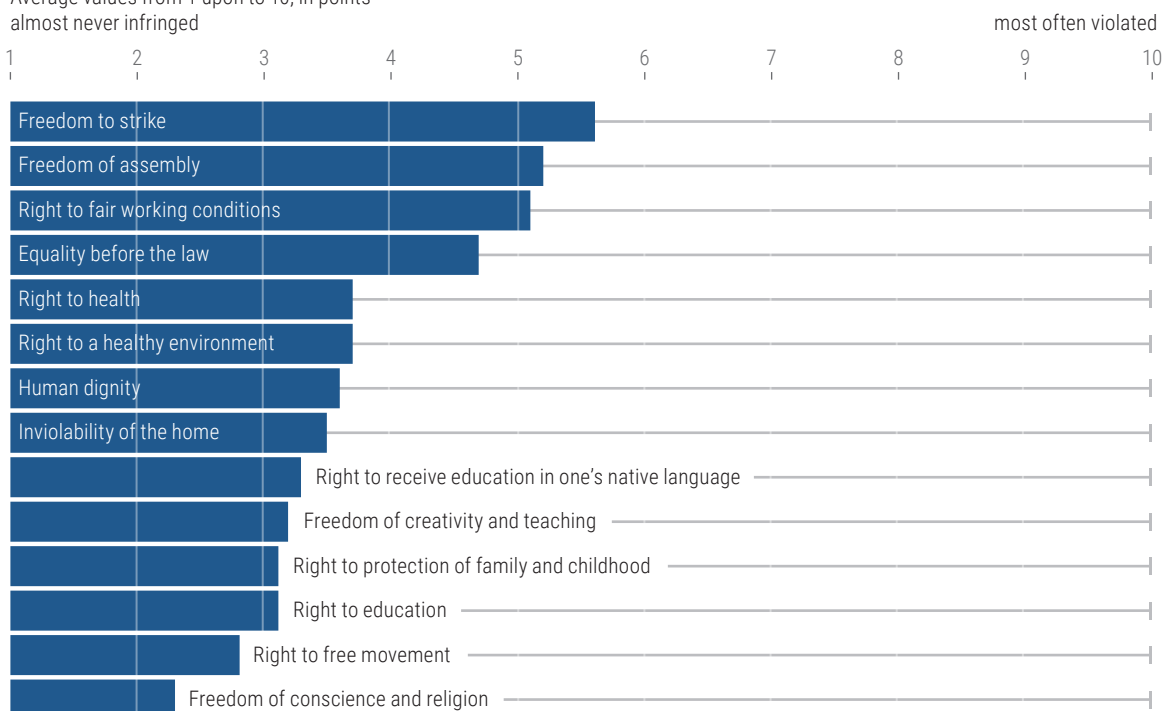


The following rights are perceived to be frequently violated in Belarus: freedom to strike, freedom of assembly, and the right to fair working conditions. Freedom of movement, the

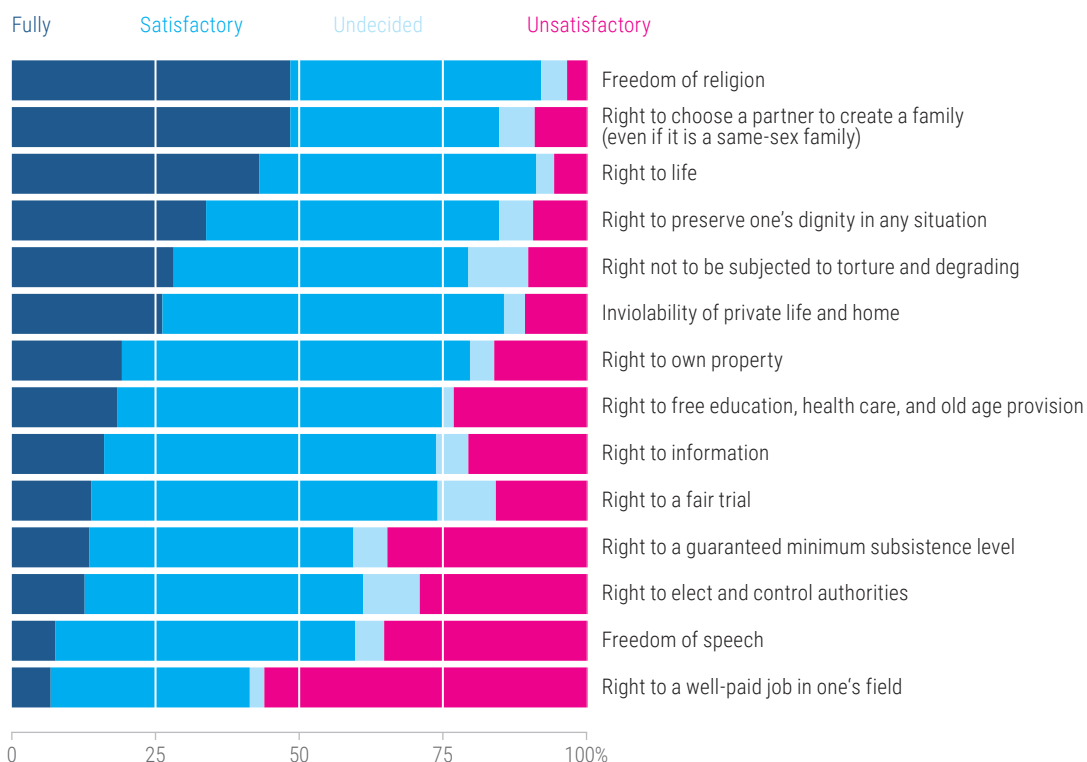
right to education, and the right to protection of the family and childhood are considered to be restricted the least (see Figure 5).

5. IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT RIGHTS FROM THE LIST PROVIDED ARE INFRINGED UPON MOST FREQUENTLY IN BELARUS AT THE MOMENT?

Average values from 1 upon to 10, in points
almost never infringed



PLEASE ASSESS THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE FOLLOWING RIGHTS ARE RESPECTED



Belarusians think that the most respected rights in Belarus are freedom of religion, the right to choose a partner to create a family, and the right to life. On the other end of the spectrum are the right to fair wage, freedom of speech, the right to a guaranteed minimum standard of living, and the right to elect and control authorities.

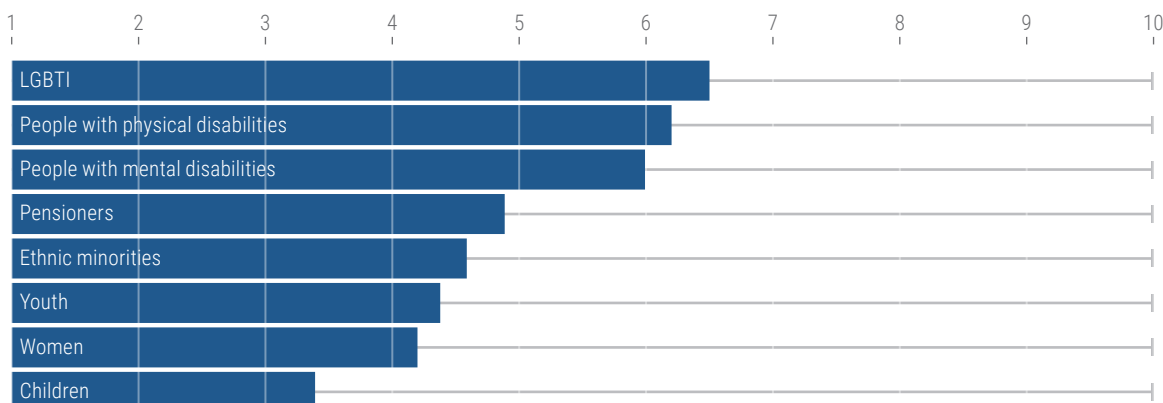
LGBTI, people with physical and mental disabilities are considered to be discriminated the most in Belarus (see Figure 7). The research indicates that Belarusians more often witness discrimination against others (52.1%), rather than themselves (36.8%).

7. IN YOUR OPINION, WHICH SOCIAL GROUP MOST FREQUENTLY EXPERIENCES UNEQUAL TREATMENT?

Average values from 1 to 10, in points

never / almost never experiences unequal treatment

experiences unequal treatment most often

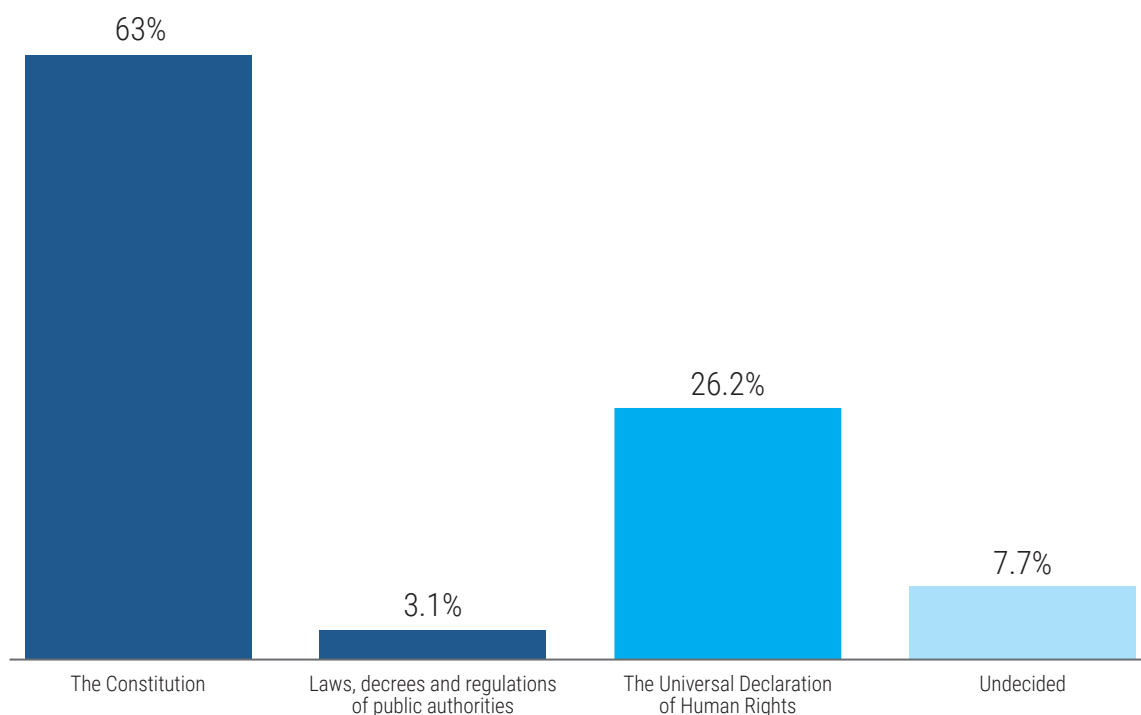


Public Perception on Human Rights: Sources of Authority, Substance, and Institutions Protecting Human Rights

For 63.0% of respondents, the main document establishing human rights is the Constitution. For another 26.2%, this document is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Laws, decrees and acts of government are not seen by respondents as significant sources of authority on human rights (see Figure 8).

Thus, **less than a third of respondents view international law as the main source of authority on human rights**, and 66.1% believe that human rights are enshrined in the documents of the national law (the Constitution, laws, decrees, and government regulatory acts).

8. RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ON THE MAIN DOCUMENTS IN WHICH FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND BASIC HUMAN FREEDOMS ARE ENSHRINED

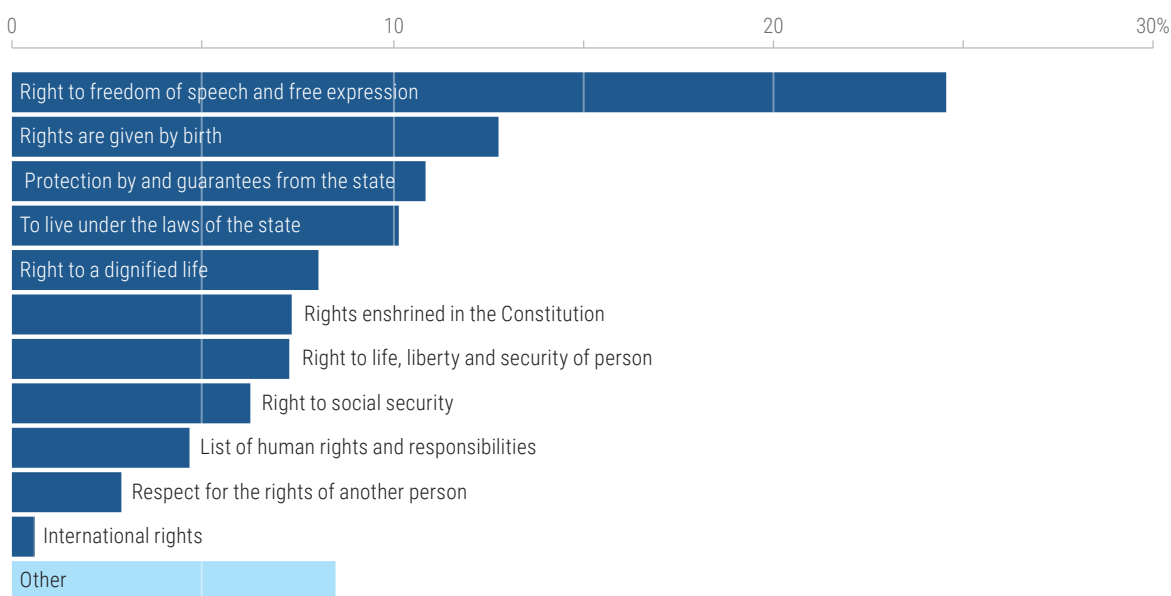


Interestingly, the respondents who believe that maintaining order in the state is more important than respect for human rights consider laws, decrees and other decisions of public authorities as the main source of authority on the rights and freedoms of citizens, rather than the Constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Among the adherents to the idea of maintaining order, 61.3% believe that human rights are enshrined first and foremost in the regulatory acts, compared to

54.0% and 51.9% respectively prioritizing the Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The respondents' perceptions on the substance of human rights are rather vague and there is no clear answer to what human rights are. The results show that associations about human rights in Belarus vary from concepts of freedom of speech and expression to obedience to the law as well as social guarantees.

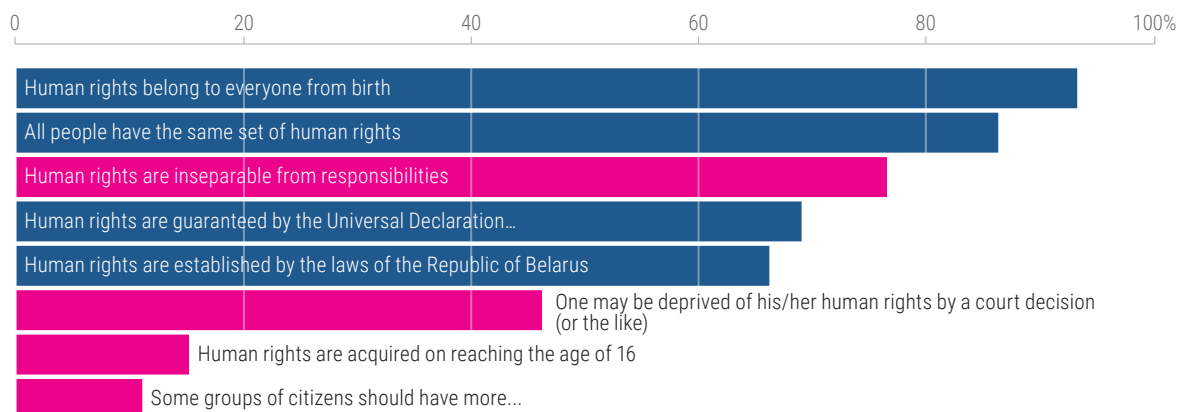
9. WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?



While agreeing with the statement that human rights are acquired by birth (93.0%) and are universal (86.3%), the population also tends to agree with the speculative ideas about the inseparability of human rights from responsibilities (76.5%). Almost half of the respondents (46.6%) think that human rights are

not absolute and can be limited by court order. About 15.0% of respondents believe that minors do not have human rights and acquire them only upon becoming 16 years of age, and 11.0% of respondents share the view that some groups should have more rights than others (see Figure 10).

10. RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS ON THE NATURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, SHARES OF THOSE TENDING TO AGREE WITH THE ABOVE STATEMENTS



"Our state endows the individual with the rights, a person is born, he or she gets rights ... the state always relies on its people, it is written in the Constitution that the state is for the people. That means, we ourselves are sources of rights"

middle age, 36-55 y.o.

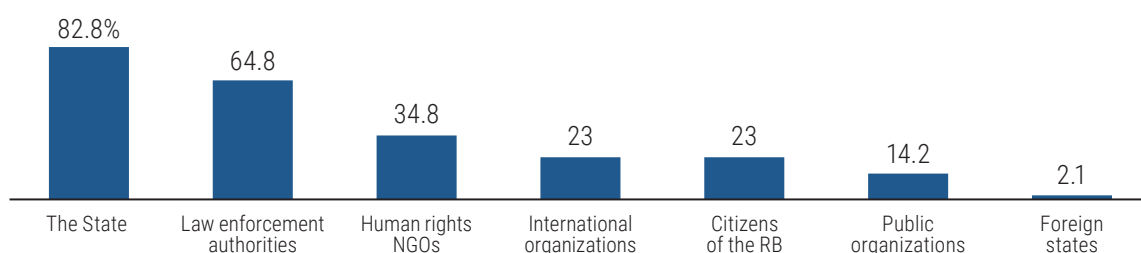
The public perception coincided with the views reflected during the focus group discussions. In particular, the focus group participants are aware of the relation between the concept of human rights in the Republic of Belarus and that in the international law. They mention the UN and a certain "Human Rights Declaration", meanwhile the universality and inalienability of human rights are not perceived as relevant issues. The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus is most often referred to as the source of authority on human rights. The rights themselves are perceived as having dual nature and generated by two sources: the people and the state.

The statist nature of views on human rights is even more obvious in the respondents' perceptions about the institutions believed to be responsible for the protection of human rights. The majority of respondents believe that it is the state (82.8%) and law enforcement institutions (police, prosecutors, courts) (64.8%) that must protect human rights in Belarus. Meanwhile, nongovernmental human rights organizations, international organizations (UN), citizens of the Republic of Belarus, public or community organizations, and foreign states are not considered to be responsible to protect human rights in Belarus (see Figure 11).

Protection of human rights is largely associated with both law enforcement bodies and human rights organizations which exposes **the inability to distinguish between what human rights organisations and law enforcement agencies do**. Among the organizations and institutions, which

are considered to be focused on protecting human rights in Belarus, respondents named attorneys and lawyers (79.5%), courts (72.1%), and nongovernmental human rights organizations (72.0%). Local authorities, along with the Parliament and the media, are not so highly rated in this regard (see Figure 12). The respondents also ranked a certain "International Court of Human Rights" and the European Court of Human Rights quite high, with 68.4% and 65.9%, respectively. The UN was mentioned by 53.3% of respondents, the OSCE by 38.9%, and the Council of Europe by 31.6%. To a certain extent these responses contradict reactions to the question above, according to which only 23.0% consider the protection of human rights to be the responsibility of international organizations. This variation in responses once again highlights the uncertainty in the public views about which actors are responsible for the protection of human rights (see Figure 12).

11. WHICH INSTITUTIONS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELARUS?



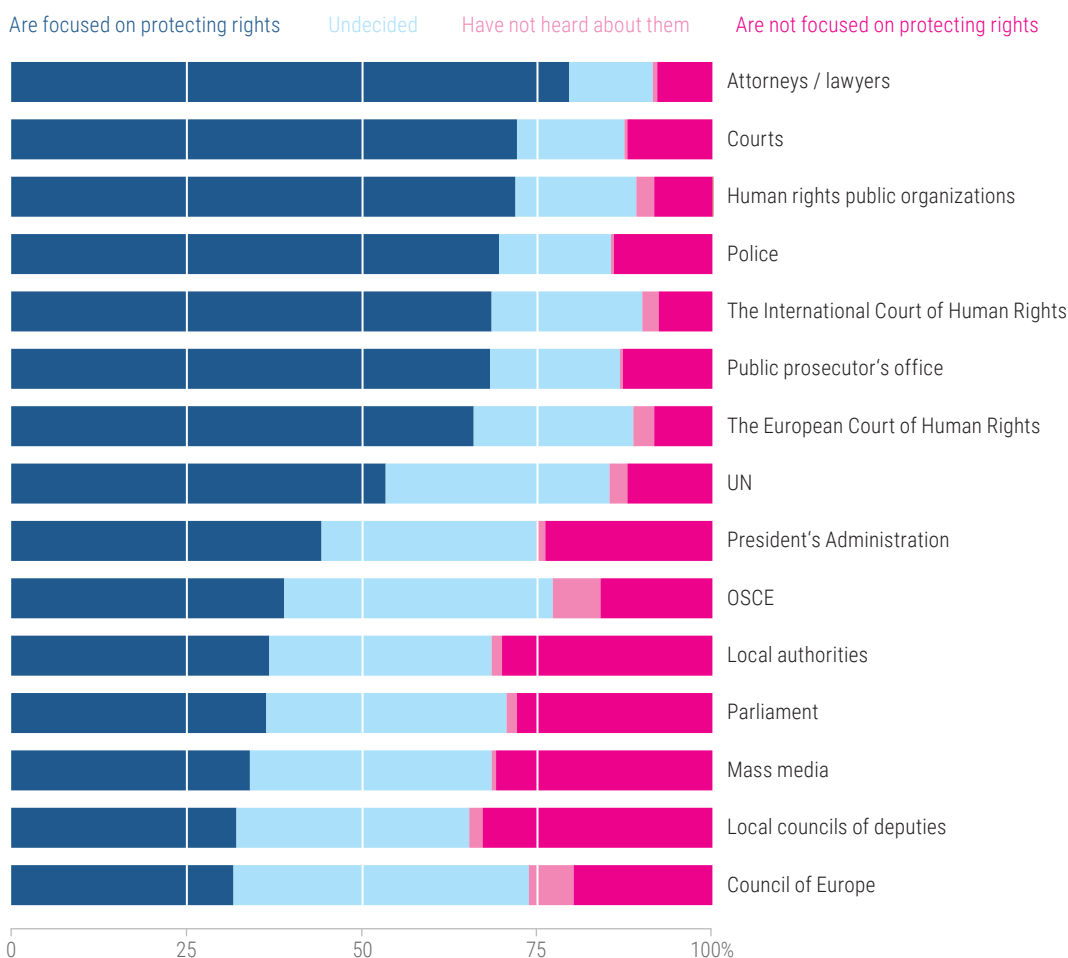
A number of focus group participants demonstrate awareness of the fact that human rights are common and universal.

At the same time, many participants of the focus group discussions believe that one should not rely on international organizations in issues related to the protection of human rights. Rather, the protection of rights is largely an internal affair of the country.

"...they are not only local in our country, they are, like, common, universally accepted for all human beings, that is, we are not talking about the rights of a Belarusian human being, but about the rights of a human being as such, we say, that is, they have to be the same, either here in Belarus, or in China, or in North Korea, and in Ivory Coast"

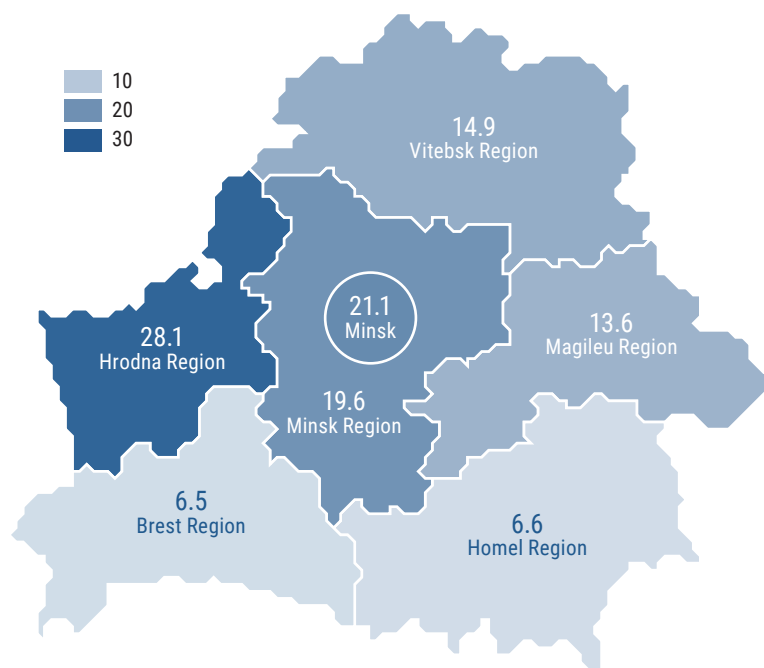
middle age, 36-55 y.o.

12. IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT ORGANIZATIONS / STRUCTURES ARE FOCUSED ON PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS?



Human Rights Violations and Response Measures

13. HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ANY VIOLATION OF RIGHTS IN RECENT YEARS (THEFT, EXTORTION, ASSAULT, VIOLATION OF RIGHTS AS AN EMPLOYEE AND SO ON)?, IN %



There is a **low potential for civic action if human rights are violated** as people usually tend to appeal to law enforcement agencies (police, courts, prosecutor's office). Social and human rights organizations are not actively used by citizens to protect their rights; only 6.1% and 7.3% of respondents respectively have turned to them for assistance.

The research shows that 83.5% of respondents said they have not faced rights violations (including theft, extortion, assault, violation of rights as an employee, etc.), while 16.5% of said they have experienced such incidents.

Regional disaggregation of data shows residents of Hrodna oblast have experienced rights violations most often (28.1%), while residents of Brest oblast (6.5%) and Homel oblast (6.6%) have had the fewest such experiences.

The proportion of respondents experiencing violations of their rights is higher among those facing financial difficulties (31.0% among respondents with "absolutely insufficient" incomes) than among those who are economically sound (16.3% among those saying their income is "absolutely sufficient").

"We also asked for help on work related matters. I do not remember the name [of the organization], we called and, you know, all the issues were resolved the following day. A state-run organization, which anyone can turn to. They resolved everything instantly, you know, and we were so happy"

middle age, 36-55 y.o.

"I have found out recently, I do not know whether this is true or not, that even the MPs, they have a different ambulance coming for them. If we have such a wonderful healthcare system, then all of us should be equal. An MP, should anything happen to him, it's a piece of cake, he will be back to life even if it was serious, and a ordinary person, well, if hit by a car, whatever, who cares. This is wrong"

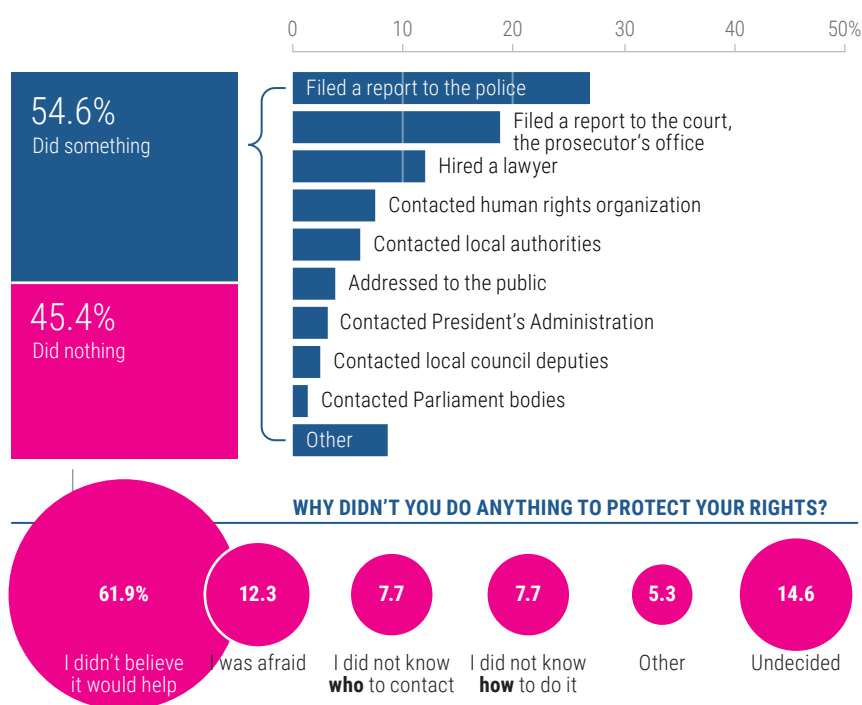
middle age, 36-55 y.o.

Participants of the focus-group discussions supplement the list of reasons why citizens choose a passive response to rights violations. Among them are a low level of trust in public institutions, the perception of public institutions as corrupt, unequal treatment of ordinary people and representatives of authorities by state institutions, red tape, and others. Moreover, only a few participants feel that their rights are sufficiently protected and are ready to turn to the relevant bodies to protect their rights. A positive experience of rights effectively protected by public institutions was recorded only in a handful of cases.

45.4% of the respondents did nothing to protect their rights, if they were violated; 26.7% of respondents turned to the police; 18.7% of respondents filed a complaint to the court or the prosecutor's office. Less commonly, respondents have appealed to the Parliament (1.2%), the local council (2.4%), and the President's Administration (3.0%). The list of institutions which suppose to protect their rights in Belarus (see Figures 11, 12 and above) and such high level of passivity once human rights are violated partly explain why human rights defence mechanisms are not fully exercised.

For example, **most respondents did nothing to protect their rights because they did not believe anything would help** (61.9%). More than 12% of respondents were afraid to speak up in defence of their rights, 7.7% did not know where to turn for help, and another 7.7% did not know how to do it (what forms to fill in, who to address the complaint to).

14-15. WHAT EXACTLY DID YOU DO TO PROTECT YOUR RIGHTS? WHY DIDN'T YOU DO ANYTHING TO PROTECT YOUR RIGHTS?



The low level of confidence results from the perception that law enforcement agencies, courts and relevant state agencies are incompetent and corrupt. Participants of focus groups note a deep social inequality and selective approach towards those who are in power.

The prevailing perception translates to the lack of readiness expressed by the participants to defend their rights by contacting the police, courts, or other institutions. To the right are statements by participants who have never had a direct experience defending their right.

One way to resolve a complex situation is to find help within one's social circle (thus supporting the extrajudicial approach to problem solving).

"If someone starts to pursue ... their rights, in the best case, they will go office to office endlessly doing paper-work. But I haven't seen any positive example of defending human rights in our country"

middle age, 36-55 y.o.

"I am but a little man ... why? Because if I gave a statement to the police that my dignity had been infringed upon, I would be told, you're not an MP, the court will not consider your complaint. It would be different if an MP claimed that his dignity was assaulted"

middle age, 36-55 y.o.

"If you get into trouble, you immediately start looking for people you know and ask who works where and how they can help. Otherwise nothing will work"

youth, 21-35 y.o.

The State and the Citizen

Most Belarusians are convinced they cannot influence decisions of the authorities (69.4%) and, in situations when their rights are violated, tend to rely on themselves and their informal networks. They are less likely to seek help from the authorities (46.1% prefer to live relying only on themselves and avoid contact with government institutions), nor other public institutions (see above). The majority of respondents shift the responsibility for the protection of human rights to state institutions, and only 23.0% believe that it is the responsibility of citizens themselves. At the same time, the respondents do not consider the state a reliable defender of human rights: only one-third of Belarusians (35.2%) believe that the government respects the rights of all citizens, 33.0% of respondents think that the state observes only the rights of certain categories of the

population, and 8.6% consider that human rights are not respected at all in Belarus. Thus, in the opinion of citizens, **the state is responsible for human rights, but is essentially incapable of guaranteeing them to all citizens, and if human rights are violated, the authorities cannot ensure an adequate response.**

These views are also reflected in the public perception prioritising “trustworthy people in power” and “order in the state” over “human rights” and “rule of law.” Belarusians see the improvement of people’s well-being as a result of the presence of credible individuals in the country’s leadership (56.7%), and only a third of Belarusians (32.0%) think that reliable and effective laws can positively affect their lives (see Figures 16 and 17).

16. WHAT, IN YOUR OPINION, IS MORE LIKELY TO PROVIDE WELL-BEING OF THE PEOPLE: TRUSTWORTHY PEOPLE IN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE COUNTRY, OR RELIABLE, EFFECTIVELY OPERATING LAWS?



17. WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT FOR BELARUS AT THE MOMENT: ORDER IN THE STATE, OR RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS?



Moreover, the number of those preferring order versus human rights is increasing among people with better income.

The majority of the population (69.4%) believes that they cannot influence government decisions in Belarus. The older generation (45-60 years of age) is more skeptical about having a voice in the decision-making compared to younger respondents who are slightly more optimistic about their role to influence the government (17.8% and 23.4%, respectively) (see Figure 18). The biggest pessimists regarding possible influence towards administrative decisions is reported among residents of Magileu oblast and the national capital: 16.1% and 17.8%, respectively. Meanwhile, Hrodna oblast is

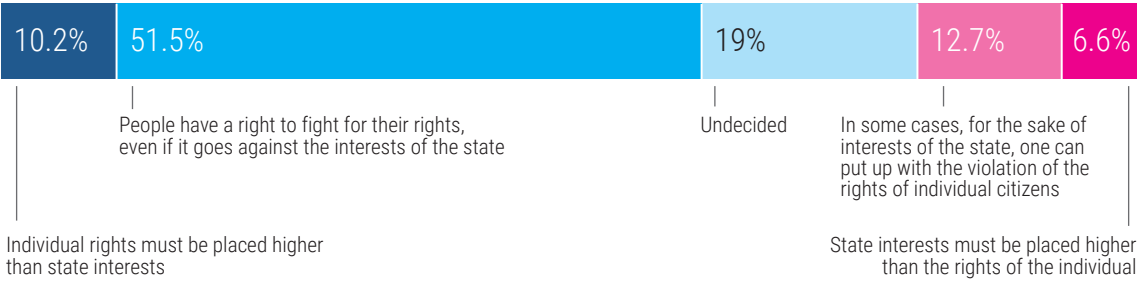
leading with 33.7% of the public, who believe they can influence government's decisions.

The majority of respondents (51.5%) support the idea of defending their rights, even if it goes against the interests of the state. Only 12.7% of Belarusians believe that, in some cases, rights of an individual may be waived for the sake of national interests, and 10.2% of respondents are convinced that the rights of the individual supersede the interests of the state.

18. RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY TO INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING IN THE COUNTRY



19. RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT BALANCE BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND NATIONAL INTERESTS



The highest percentage of the respondents supporting the prevalence of human rights over state interests is recorded in Magileu oblast (67.8%), the lowest in Vitebsk oblast (27.2%). The proportion of those willing to defend their rights, even to the detriment of the state, is higher among individuals who have better income.

Nevertheless, the above mentioned perceptions to defend human rights do not translate into civic ac-

tion and do not lead to increased public pressure on the authorities. Most Belarusians (46.1%) prefer to live relying only on themselves and avoid contact with government bodies, 15.1% say that, in order to achieve their objectives, they can easily contact the authorities, 12.0% of respondents believe that their life is totally dependent on the authorities, and 11.2% are afraid to express any complaints against the government.

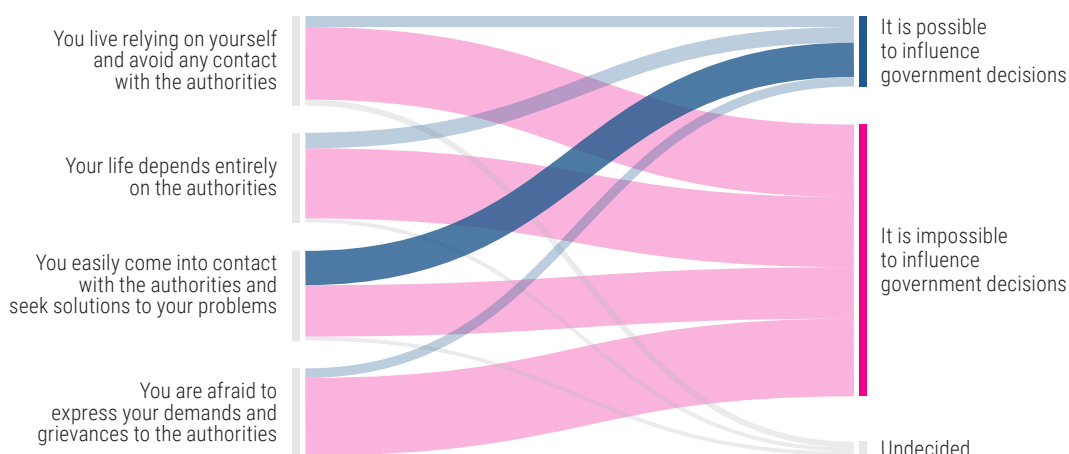
20. HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE AUTHORITIES?



People who do not fear contacting government bodies and file the complaints, have higher proportion of those confident in their ability to influence government decision-making.

However, even among the respondents opting for contact with the authorities, only 32.5% believe their attempts to influence those decisions will be productive.

21. BELARUSIANS' VIEWS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE AUTHORITIES VIS-A-VIS AN ASSESSMENT OF THE POSSIBILITY TO INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING. IN %



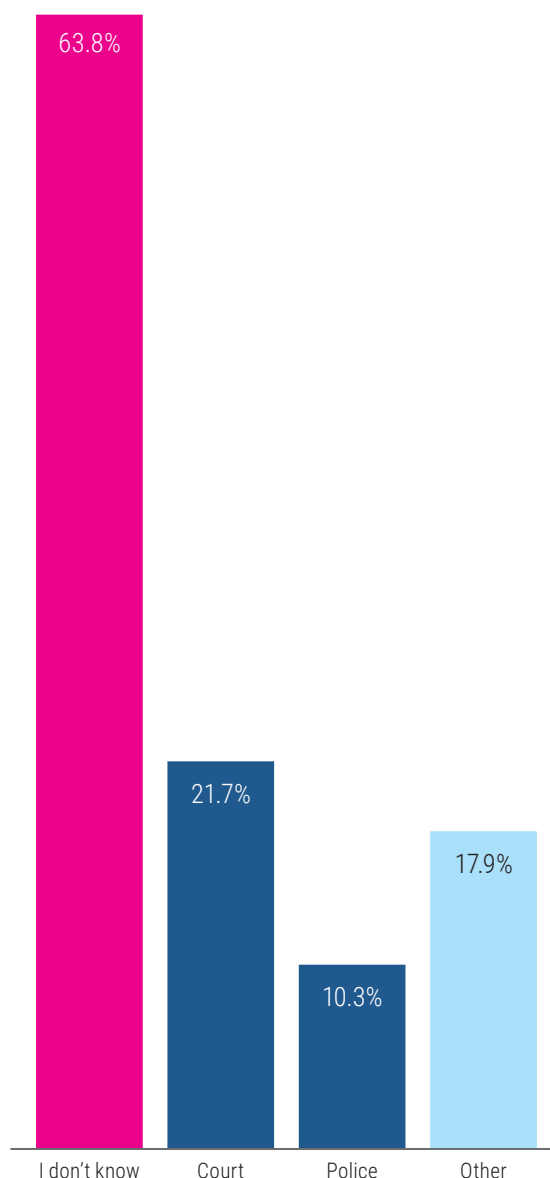
Defending Human Rights: National and International Organizations

As mentioned above, people tend to confuse the activities of human rights defenders and work of law enforcement government institutions, such as the police, prosecutors, judges, and state-appointed attorneys. The state in general, including these institutions, is perceived as primarily responsible for protecting human rights. Selected state institutions are followed by Belarusian human rights organizations and an even a smaller percentage of the surveyed population think that international organizations have anything to do with the human rights in Belarus.

Therefore it is not surprising that once human rights are violated, a third of citizens (32.0%) go to the police or the court. However, it is rather disturbing that **63.8% of respondents say they do not know where to go, if their rights are violated.**

At the same time, most respondents (68.1%) agree that human rights experts and organizations should be able to operate in any country, that rights will be violated less often where people are ready to defend them (67.7%), and that Belarusian nongovernmental and human rights organizations play an important role in the society (54.3%). A significant number of respondents believe that, in conflicts with the state, the individual is particularly vulnerable, and in such cases should have an option to receive assistance from Belarusian and international HRDs. Just over a third of respondents believe that human rights are an internal matter of each country (35.9%). Over 27% do not agree with this point of view, and 36.5% could not answer this question (i.e. have no particular opinion).

22. DO YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHERE TO GO IN THE CASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS?



23. VIEWS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS WORK

Agree

Don't agree

Undecided

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

In every country, there should be independent experts, working freely to defend the rights



Rights are violated less where people are ready to defend them



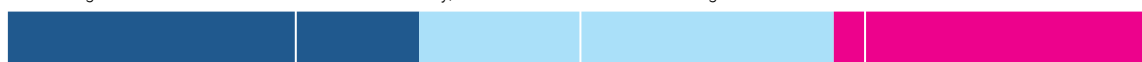
Belarusian public organizations defending the rights of citizens have an important social function



The individual is particularly vulnerable in a conflict with the state, so to protect his/her rights, he/she can seek the help of international and Belarusian human rights defenders



Human rights are an internal matter for each country, and other countries have no right to interfere



0 25 50 75 100%

Among those who agree with the statement that human rights are an internal matter of each country, a significant proportion of respondents (36.9%) were not able to articulate the reason for why they think so. The most popular explanation was the concept of sovereignty and the need to resolve disputes within the country independently from external actors. A significant proportion of those favoring the participation of other countries in resolving human rights abuses could not explain their position (44.5%) either. At the same time, 10.1% argue that interference of other countries is a way to avoid abuse of power and 14.1% believe that human rights are universal for all people in all countries.

Among those who consider it possible contacting Belarusian and international HRDs in case of a conflict of between the individual and the state, the majority (31.3%) were not able to articulate any specific reasons for why the citizen would have the right to refer to them; 14.0% of respondents believe in the professionalism of HRDs and the effectiveness of the assistance they provide. Another **12.1% consider it appropriate to seek assistance from HRDs as these institutions work in the legal field and it is their mission to protect the rights of citizens.**

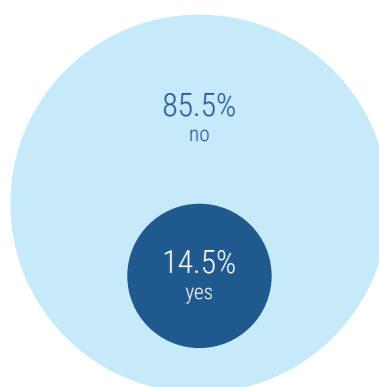
Among those who believe that one should not seek help from Belarusian or international nongovernmental human rights organizations in addressing human rights violations, 47.3% cannot rationalize their views. To 16.1% of respondents, the main reason to avoid contacting HRDs is the belief that these appeals would be futile and that human rights organizations are ineffective. Another 13.4% believe that the conflict between the individual and the state should be resolved internally within the country and without the involvement of international or Belarusian nongovernmental organizations.

The quantitative analysis revealed a relatively low awareness of Belarusian citizens regarding international instruments to defend and monitor human rights in Belarus. The survey that the majority of the respondents (57.3%) have never heard about the mandate of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Belarus. 23.7% positively assessed the existence of this position, and 17.3% indicated they had no preference.

Human Rights Organizations: Visibility and Recognition of Work

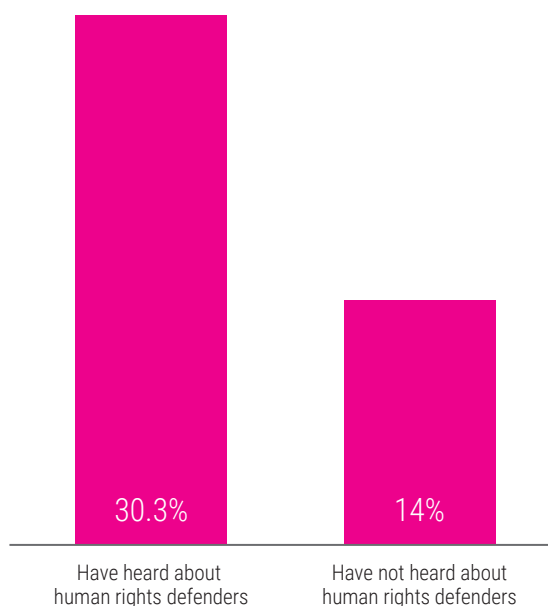
The level of public recognition of human rights organizations in Belarus is rather low. Only 14.5% of respondents have heard about independent organizations advocating for and defending human rights in Belarus (see Figure 24). The majority of those who are aware of human rights organisations (96.5%) consider their work as necessary and useful to society.

24. HAVE YOU HEARD ANYTHING ABOUT INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATIONS ADVOCATING FOR AND DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS (HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS) IN OUR COUNTRY?



The highest shares of the respondents who have heard of such organizations reside in Hrodna oblast (33.7%), Minsk oblast (29.4%), and in Minsk itself (29.4%). Among individuals who have heard about HRDs, the proportion of those who have experienced violation of rights is 2.2 times higher than among those who do not know anything about such organizations.

25. HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ANY VIOLATION OF YOUR RIGHTS IN RECENT YEARS (THEFT, EXTORTION, ASSAULT, VIOLATION OF YOUR RIGHTS AS A SALARIED WORKER, ETC.)?



Those who are aware of HRDs consider the welfare of the people as more dependent on reliable and effective laws (47.6%). The prevailing view among the respondents who are not aware of independent human rights organizations is that the well-being of the nation is largely the result of the presence of credible people in the leadership (59.0%). Those citizens who know HRDs think that respect for human rights should be a priority for the present-day Belarus (49.7%), while those who have never heard of HRDs give preference to order in the state (55.2%).

14.5% of respondents who are aware of HRDs in Belarus noted that they know the following organizations:

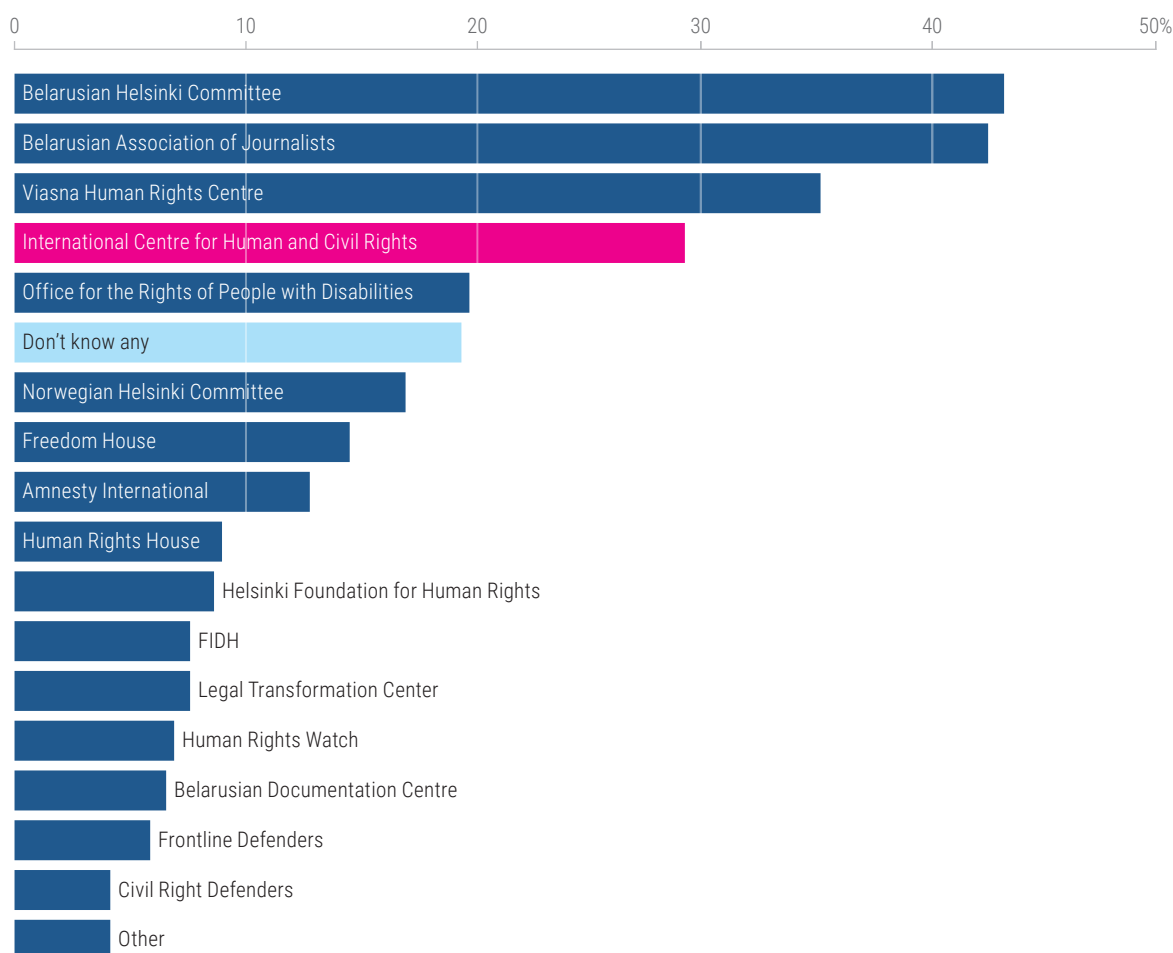
- Belarusian Helsinki Committee (43.3%),
- Belarusian Association of Journalists (42.7%),
- Viasna Human Rights Centre (35.4%)

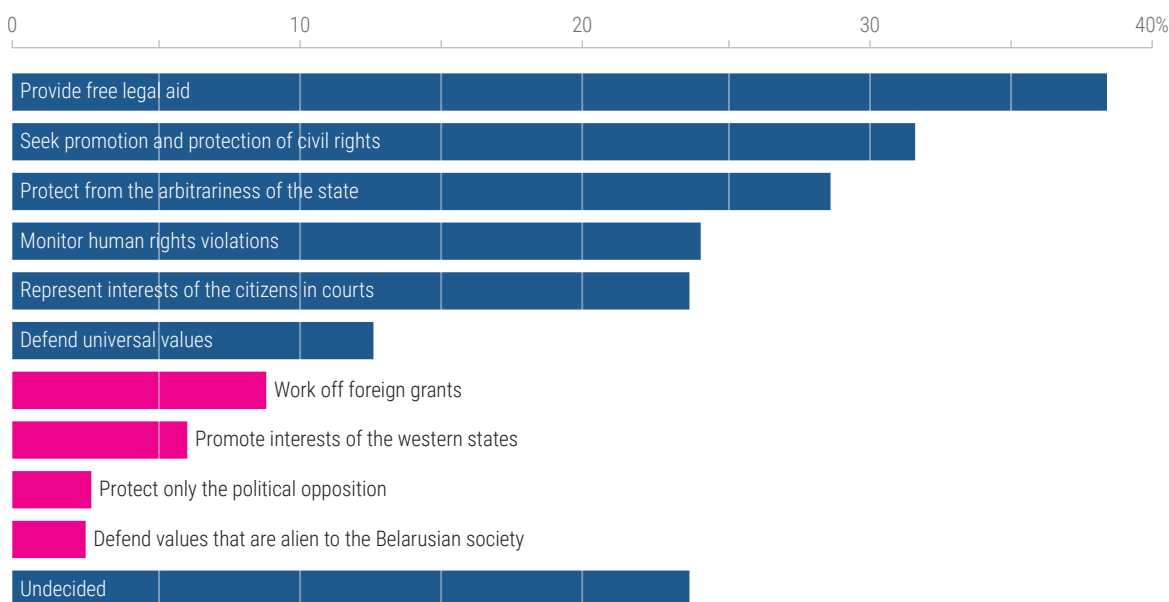
Almost one-fifth (19.7%) of respondents did not know any human rights organization, and 29.3% mention a certain “International Center for Human and Citizens’ Rights,” which does not exist in Belarus. This means that all data regarding visibility of human rights organizations should be considered cautiously, and the statis-

tics indicated above should not be viewed as their popularity rating. Rather, these are the three organizations that are best recognized by the respondents who are aware of HRDs, while other associations are probably not known to them.

Respondents who are aware of HRDs’ activities think human rights organizations in Belarus provide free legal aid (38.4%), promote civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (31.6%), and protect against abuse of power by the state (28.7%). At the same time, negative characteristics, such as “consumption of foreign grants,” “defend only political opposition,” “protect values that are alien to the Belarusian society” are not commonly shared and, in principle, are not statistically significant.

26. WHICH BELARUSIAN AND INTERNATIONAL INDEPENDENT HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS DO YOU KNOW?



27. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS BEST REFLECTS YOUR OPINION ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS IN BELARUS?


Focus groups also revealed a very low awareness of human rights organisations especially among participants who are not engaged in political activism. However, "Viasna" is among those, which are occasionally mentioned.

"We met "Viasna," I have no idea what their status was. The person looked like a professional person, who is assisting people, when they are in trouble and understands all the details"

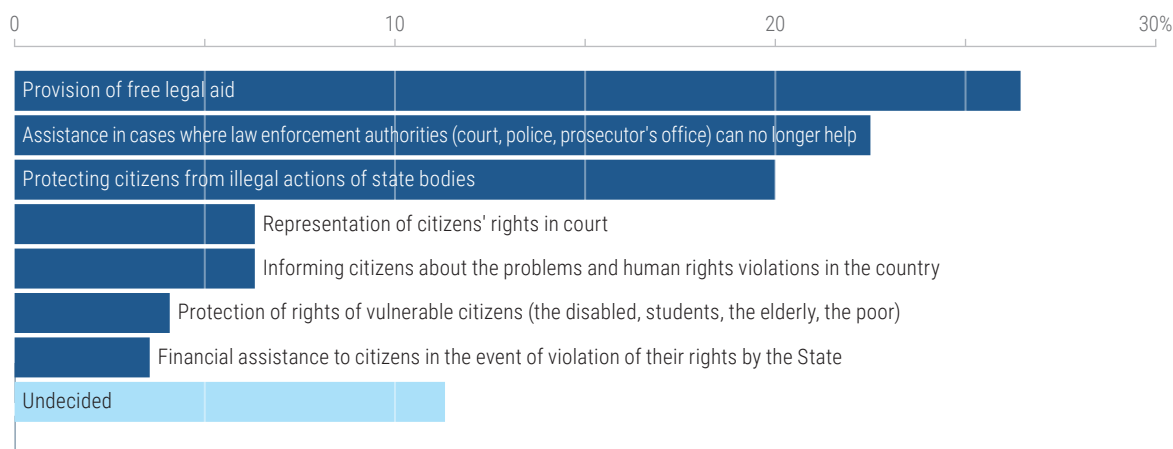
middle age, 36-55 y.o.

At the same time, the general attitude toward human rights organizations is positive. Focus group participants note that such institutions should exist. Politically active participants are aware of a number of human rights organizations and mention the following: Viasna, BAJ, Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Legal Assistance to the Population, Belarusian Documentation Centre, as well as free trade unions.

"Of all human rights organizations "Viasna" is the most famous, and it is subject to repressions more than any other. Bialitski, Stefanovich spent a term in prison. This speaks about their effectiveness. I also know people who were assisted by them. Moreover, they do provide support for covering fines, which is among the worst forms of oppression by the regime the regime. If someone goes to a rally, they know that they, if needed, can get help with the payment of fines"

*middle age, 36-55 y.o.
a politically active member*

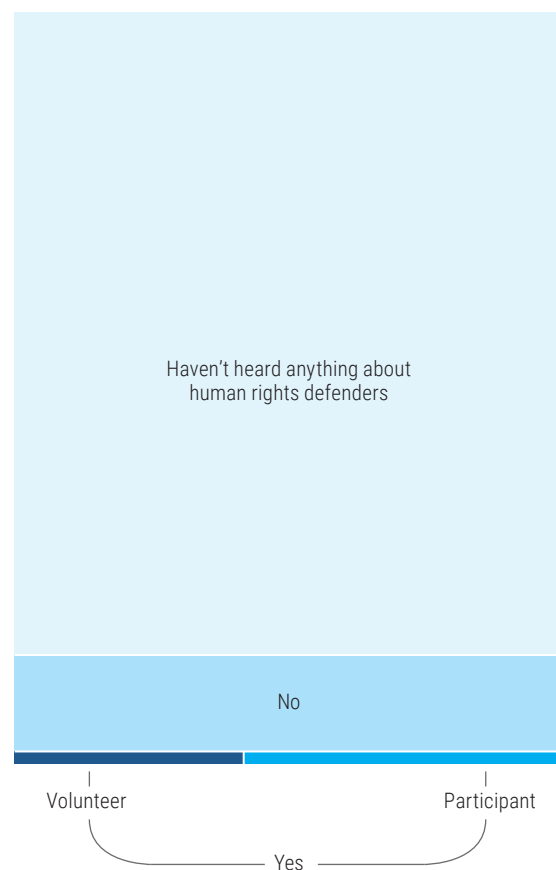
28. WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT AREA OF WORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS ASSOCIATIONS?



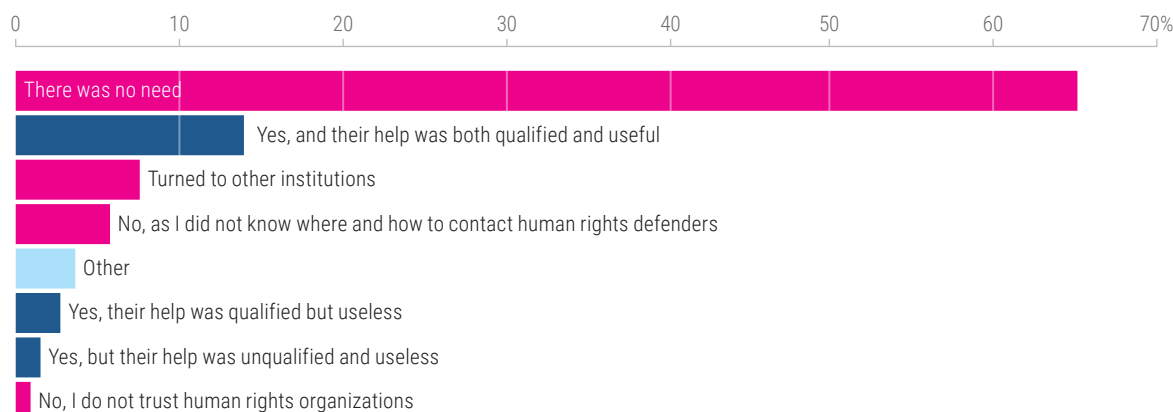
The respondents believe that the most important role of human rights organizations is in the provision of free legal aid (26.4%) and assistance in situations when law enforcement bodies (court, police, prosecutor's office) can no longer help (22.4%).

The overwhelming majority of respondents (88.5%) have never participated in the work of human rights organizations. Among the 11.5% of respondents who have taken part in their activities, some have acted as volunteers (4.8% of total), and others attended events organized by HRDs (6.7% of total).

29. HAVE YOU EVER TAKEN ANY PART IN THE ACTIVITIES OF HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS? IF SO, IN WHAT CAPACITY?



30. HAVE YOU OR ANYONE YOU KNOW EVER TURNED FOR HELP TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (INDEPENDENT ASSOCIATIONS FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS) IN DEFENSE OF THEIR RIGHTS?

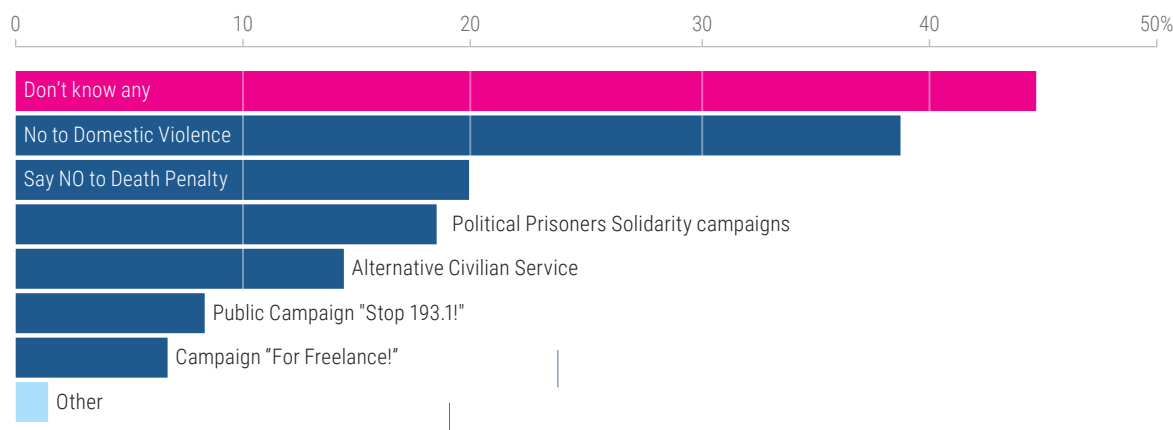


The majority of those who are aware about the human rights activists (67.0%) did not experience the need for their help. Meanwhile, 13.8% have requested their assistance and consider their work as qualified and helpful.

People who know HRDs, **do not know much about national human rights advocacy campaigns**. Belaru-

sians named the campaign "No to Domestic Violence" (37.5%) as the most prominent, although it was not an activity of the human rights organizations. Meanwhile, other campaigns mentioned were along the threshold of the sampling error threshold. For example, the campaign against death penalty collected 2.7% of mentions across the sample, while the sampling error is 3.1 percentage points.

31. WHICH HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGNS DO YOU REMEMBER?



Various projects and campaigns by human rights organizations were mentioned during the focus group discussions, in particular:

- The campaign "For Alternative Civilian Service in Belarus"
- The civic campaign "Stop 193.1!"
- Political Prisoners Solidarity campaigns (pickets, hunger strike in support of political prisoners)
- "Say NO to the Death Penalty!" (a media campaign aimed at drawing attention to the issue, various publications and other public awareness activities)

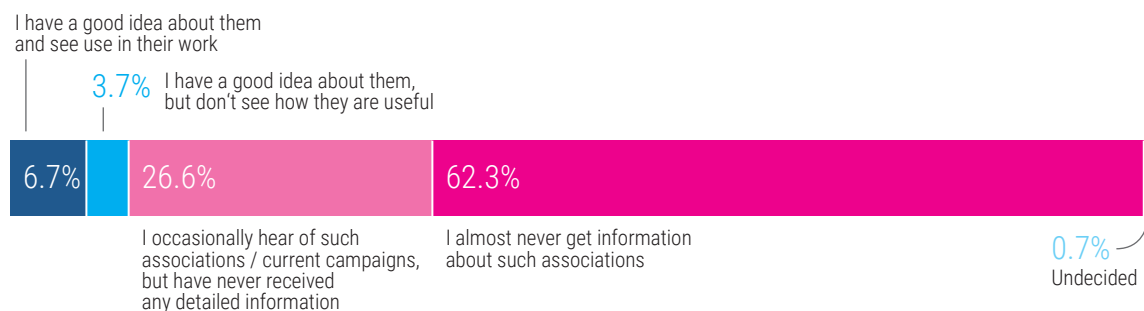
- "Accessibility Week," aimed at increasing public awareness of and assistance to people with disabilities
- The campaign "For Freelance!"

Attitudes toward these activities were quite positive. The focus group participants noted that almost any activity of a human rights organization dedicated to awareness raising of the public about and protecting rights would be perceived positively. At the same time, the degree of acceptance varied depending on the theme of the event and individual attitude toward it (see Table 1).

ATTITUDES OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS TOWARDS ACTIVITIES OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

"Accessibility Week"	Positive attitudes in general, but without a differentiated assessment of the action	Mostly positive assessments: "good," "useful". But there is also a critical assessment: <i>"Its effectiveness is in question, it is just a postcard for the West that we are dealing with these issues, but there is no real impact"</i>
"For Alternative Civilian Service in Belarus"	Is generally assessed as useful, but without enthusiastic support	<i>"Some do not want to serve [in the military], so they could go for alternative service" (middle age, 35-55 y.o.)</i> <i>"Why should we need an army, actually, it's better to work in a hospital. They would do more good there than in the army" (senior, 56 y.o. or older)</i>
"For Freelance!"	Generally neutral	No extensive comments on the campaign were provided
"Say NO to the Death Penalty!"	There were negative opinions voiced, including those resulting from individual attitudes toward death penalty; opponents of death penalty also provided negative reactions	<i>"I have heard about the campaign, and was involved in it, but it's not serious. It can accomplish nothing. If the EU was not able to influence the situation, we definitely cannot do anything from the inside" (youth, 21-35 y.o.)</i>
Civic Campaign "Stop 193.1!"	Useful, but the substance of the campaign is difficult to grasp	<i>"I can't say if there should be criminal liability, but it must be regulated somehow. The state should regulate this issue and you shouldn't just be able to register any organization" (youth, 21-35 y.o.)</i> <i>"Anyway, it is necessary to examine what kind of association is being organized. The state should control them, yes" (senior, 56 y.o. or older)</i>
Political Prisoners Solidarity campaigns	Supported by some of the participants, some do not share the prisoners' position	<i>"Personally, I don't share the position of our political prisoners" (youth, 25-31 y.o.)</i> <i>"I'm not interested in it, because now it is no longer relevant, they are being released now, but it was a big problem previously. Because back then people got arrested indiscriminately during rallies" (youth, 25-31 y.o.)</i> <i>"Before the elections some prisoners were released, and it is only thanks to the pressure from the European countries and the United States. If it had not been for this pressure..." (youth, 25-31 y.o.)</i>

32. WHICH STATEMENT BEST REFLECTS YOUR AWARENESS ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY EXISTING HUMAN RIGHTS ASSOCIATIONS?

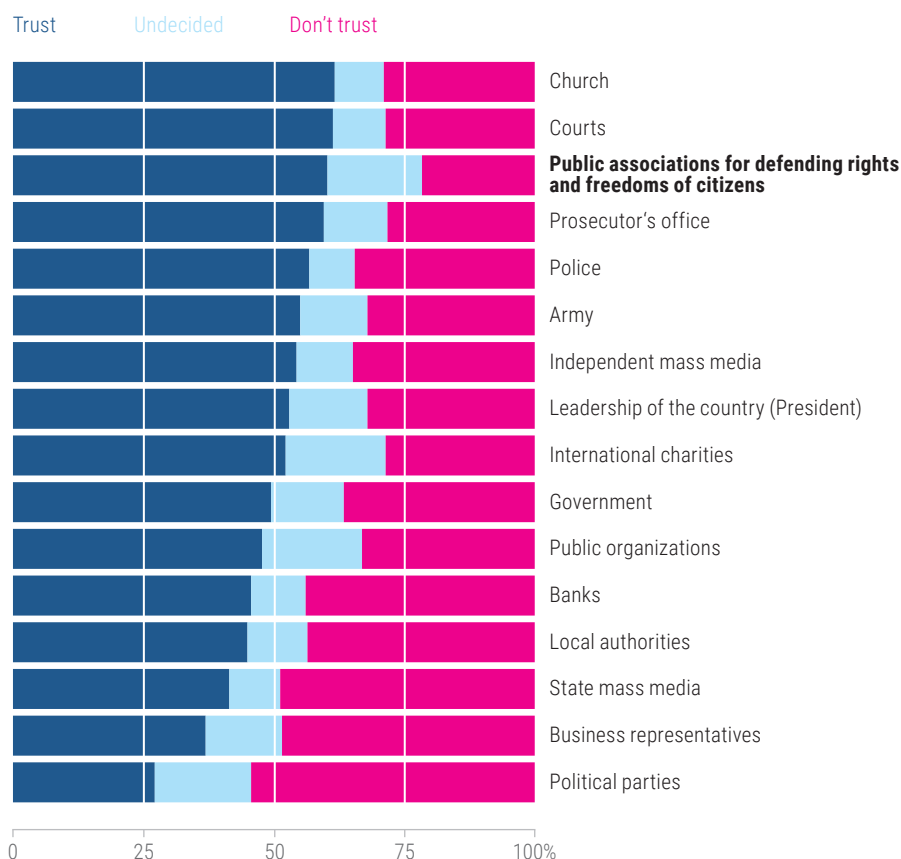


In general, the majority of the population is insufficiently informed about the activities and services provided by human rights organizations. Two-thirds of Belarusians (62.3%) have never received any information about such organizations, while 26.6% occasionally hear about their work, but have not received any detailed information.

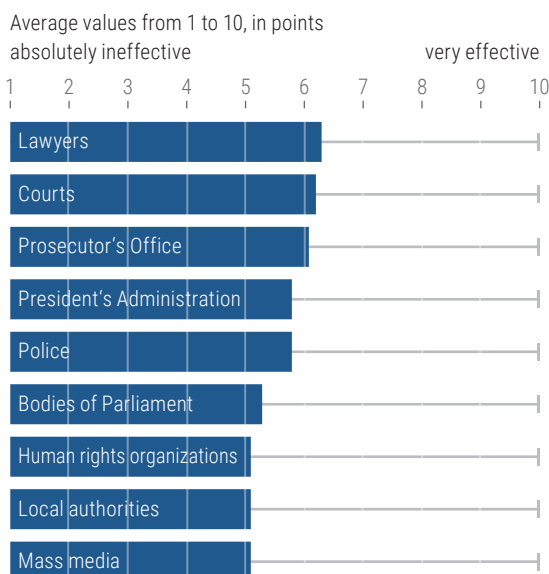
In general, all respondents are more inclined to trust human rights organizations (60.4%), although it is very likely

that they may mistakenly consider some of law enforcement institutions under the same notion. Between 52.4% and 61.6% of respondents trust the following institutions: the church, courts, public associations for the protection of the rights and freedoms of citizens, the prosecutor's office, the police, the army, the independent media, the national government (the President), and international charitable organizations. The majority of respondents (54.3%) are only skeptical about political parties.

33. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU TRUST THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS?



34. HOW DO YOU ASSESS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS AIMED AT PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF CITIZENS OF BELARUS?

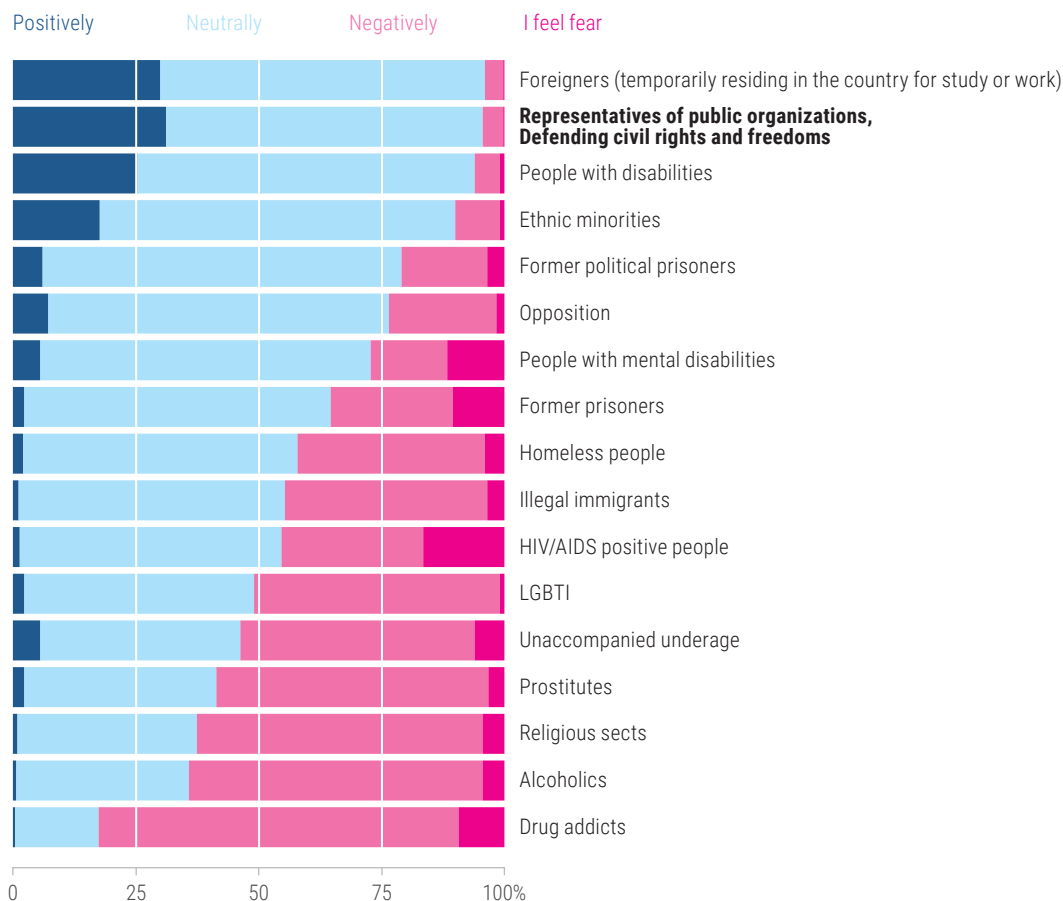


While the respondents trust human rights organizations, their effectiveness is perceived as low. The highest average impact assessment was given to lawyers, the lowest to human rights organizations, local authorities, and the media.

In general, women are more positive about the effectiveness of human rights organizations' work, providing an average rating of 5.5 points out of 10, than men (4.8 points).

The public attitude to representatives of human rights organizations ranges from neutral to positive (64.2% of respondents expressed neutral attitude and 31.2% positive). The perception of the political opposition is more negative (about 23.5% expressed negative attitude, and 76.5% are neutral or positive). Similar attitudes are observed toward former political prisoners (20.9% of respondents view them negatively, 79.1% are neutral or positive).

35. WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TO THE LISTED GROUPS OF POPULATION?



The participants of focus groups discussed factors influencing the level of trust toward human rights organizations. The following types of actions were mentioned as an effective magnet for public attention and appreciation of HRDs work: legal literacy programs, free legal aid, and public oversight over government bodies. The participants said that human rights organizations should deal with relevant issues that are visible to the community.

"[I will support a human rights organization], if the interests which it defends are close to mine and are relevant to me at that time. These organizations will at least raise the level of legal literacy of the society"

youth, 21-35, y.o.

"Yes, we now have such sensitive topics as housing services, pensions, utility tariffs. As the director of state control committee has said correctly, they are pulled out of a hat, young economists who are barely out of school are trying to figure out how they could take more money out of citizens' pockets. The same goes for pension funds. If only a human rights organization would address these issues, which are currently very urgent, started publishing about it"

middle age, 36-55, y.o.

"...to explain to people how to use their rights, and to explain how to apply the law in a given situation. A human rights activist, first of all, should be a lawyer"

middle age, 36-55, y.o.

An opinion that human rights organizations should focus on the rule of law in the country as a whole was voiced during the discussion, but not widely shared.

"It is not so much a specific person that they need to protect. Rather, they should enforce the rule of law in general. In order for the laws to comply with the Constitution, for example, or so that human rights don't get lost in those laws"

senior, 56 y.o. or older

Some distrust was voiced towards human rights organizations advocating for political rights. For example, several discussants were apprehensive that such organizations are politically engaged.

"What if the organization only represents certain interests, in which legal framework does it then exist?"

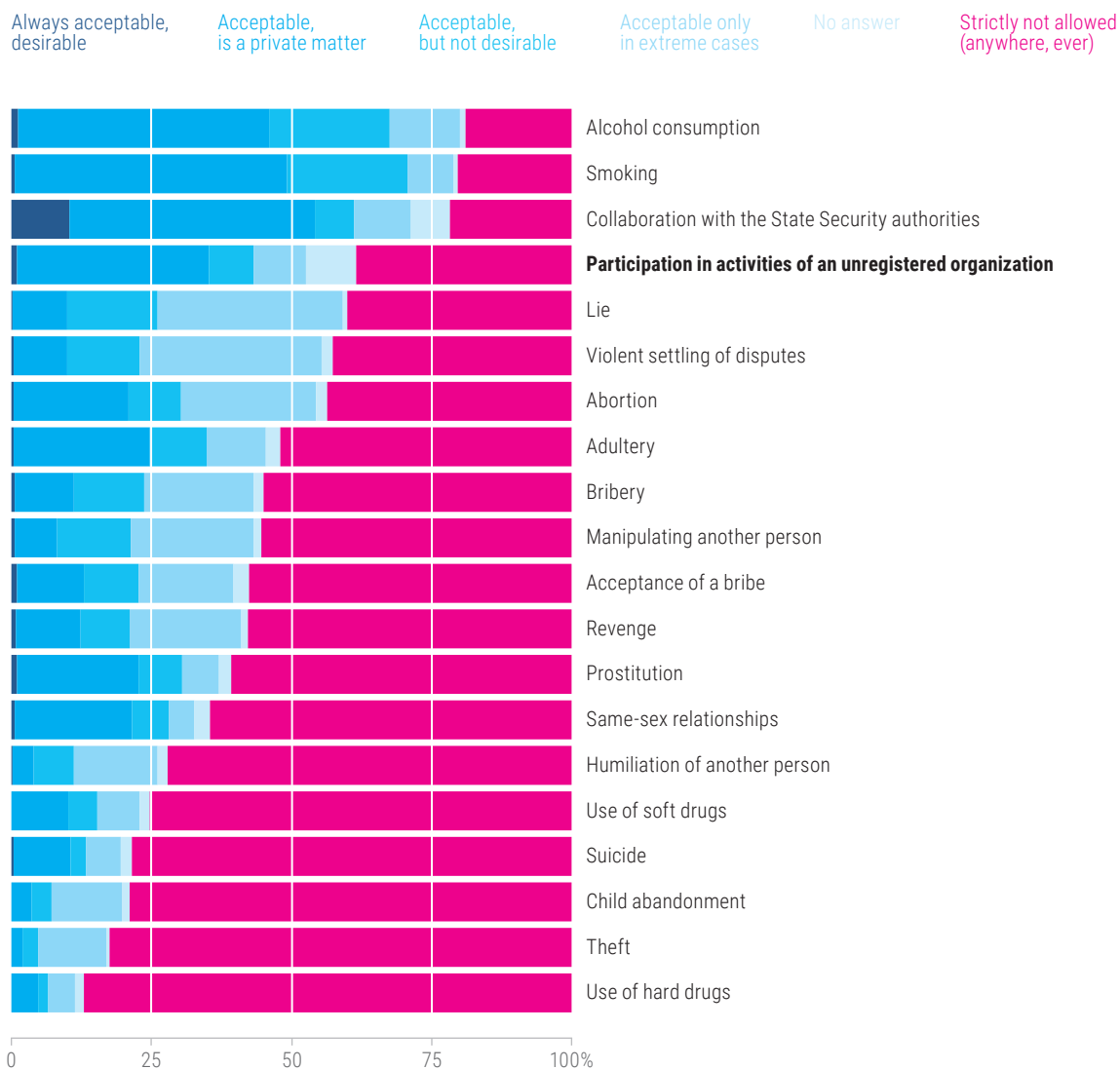
youth, 21-35, y.o.

"If such an organization emerges, it will certainly be difficult to win trust fast. Trust will be a problem. It is important to help everyone; each official who fell in disgrace needs to feel that he will be protected. Every police officer, if he opposes the system deep in his heart, should know that he will get protection. And so all the people of Belarus should know that there is an organization that helps everyone. Of course, if the person deserves another treatment, nobody will help him, and such people do exist"

Given the fact that there is a criminal liability for individuals acting on behalf of an unregistered public organization in Belarus, and a number of human rights organizations in Belarus are unregistered, population's attitudes in this respect are particularly critical. A large share of the population tend to perceive participation in activi-

ties of an unregistered organization as unacceptable and undesirable, but a third of the population (34.2%) believe such activity is permissible and is a private matter. In addition, in comparison to other offenses, participation in an unregistered organization is apparently not considered a serious matter.

36. WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TO THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS OF AN INDIVIDUAL?





Freedom House is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20036

120 Wall Street, 26th Floor
New York, NY 10005

www.freedomhouse.org
[@freedomhouseDC](https://www.facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC)
202.296.5101
info@freedomhouse.org