

WHAT BELARUSIAN SOCIETY THINKS ON REFORMS

Introduction

Any reform brings about a disruption in the system of checks and balances, winners and losers. Therefore, it is the (un)willingness of society to endure the difficulties associated with reforms that determines the tactics chosen by reformers, namely, the choice of the pace and depth of reforms.

As part of the REFORUM¹ project, BISS conducted a social survey on reforms². The main objectives of the study were to identify the general attitude of the Belarusians to reforms and determine the priority areas for reforms.

Key findings of the study:

- Most Belarusians believe that the country is in need of reforms, and a large proportion of the respondents are potentially ready to endure their negative consequences. Moreover, the attitude to the idea of putting in place reforms is quite positive in Belarusian society.
- The priority area that requires reforms is the healthcare system of the country, according to the population at large. Most of the Belarusians believe that reforms should be developed and introduced by government organizations in association with all stakeholders.

1. General attitude of the population to reforms

A definite conclusion can be drawn based on the findings of the survey that the population clearly senses the need for reforms in the country. Asked whether Belarus needs reforms, 42.8% of the respondents said that the country definitely required reforms, and 32.7% said that the country more likely needed reforms than not.

However, despite the fact that more than three-fourths of the population believes reforms to be necessary, only 15.3% of the respondents are absolutely ready to endure the negative consequences of reforms, whereas 35.8% are "more likely ready". These figures show a discrepancy between what the Belarusians believe to be theoretically important for the country and what they believe to be significant for themselves.

In order to identify potential motivation for reforms, the respondents were asked the question: Why would they be ready to endure the negative consequences of reforms within five to seven years of their adoption? For most people, the well-being of their children can become such a motive — it was mentioned by 55.3% of the respondents. Their personal well-being is also a reason with high potential, picked by 47.8% of those who answered the question. Further, the Belarusians appear to be ready to endure the aftermath of the reform for the sake of a strong, self-sufficient and independent Belarus — this answer was chosen by 48.1% of the respondents. The European development path and integration with the EU do not seem to be too attractive benefits for the Belarusians, as only 10.5% of the respondents are ready to put up with the

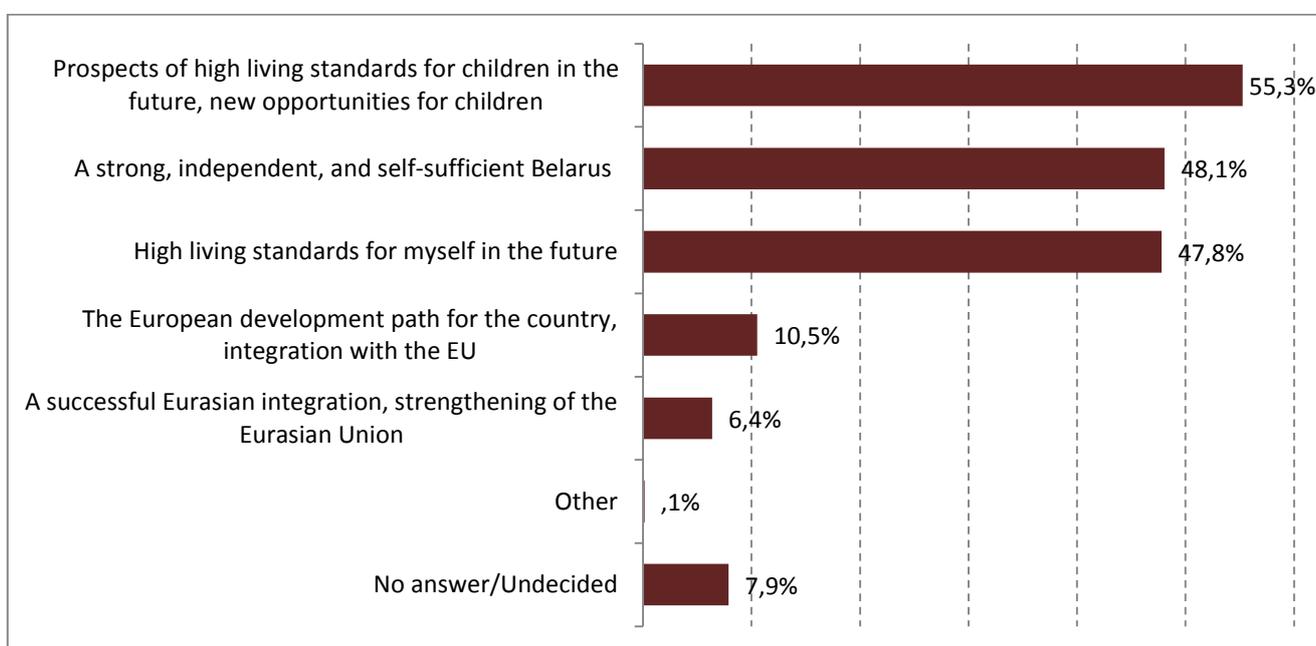
¹ The project "Via the Modernization of Belarus to a Competitive Society" (REFORUM) is implemented under the auspices of the European Union.

² Based on the findings of a structured survey of rural and urban population of Belarus aged 16 and older. The sample of the survey comprises 1,350 interviews and is representative of the regional, settlement, gender and age structure of the population. The survey was conducted by Satio in March–April 2014.

consequences of reforms for the sake of the European integration. The potential of the Eurasian integration is quite low as well, with only 6.4% of the respondents thinking it to be a worthy reason to endure the negative impact of reforms. This is the fundamental difference between Belarus and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in which the prospects of EU membership and idea of getting “home to Europe” was the benefit, for which the hardships caused by reforms seemed justified.

Overall, those who are ready to endure the effects of reforms seem to have two basic components of their motivation, the “pragmatic” and “patriotic” ones. The “integration” element, manifested in the development of relationships with the EU or the Eurasian Union, is not a strong enough motive. Moreover, the cautious attitude of the Belarusians to integration projects, which was identified in previous studies by BISS, has been encouraged even more by the recent events in Ukraine. Despite the fact that based on an IISEPS survey conducted in March 2014, more Belarusians would prefer a union with Russia to EU membership³, the answer “a strong, self-sufficient and independent Belarus” turns out to be more attractive to the Belarusians compared with the European or Eurasian integration.

Chart 1. Answers to the question “Why would you be ready to endure the negative consequences of reforms, such as a decrease in living standards, growth of unemployment, higher inflation, and curtailment of social support, within five to seven years of the adoption of reforms?”



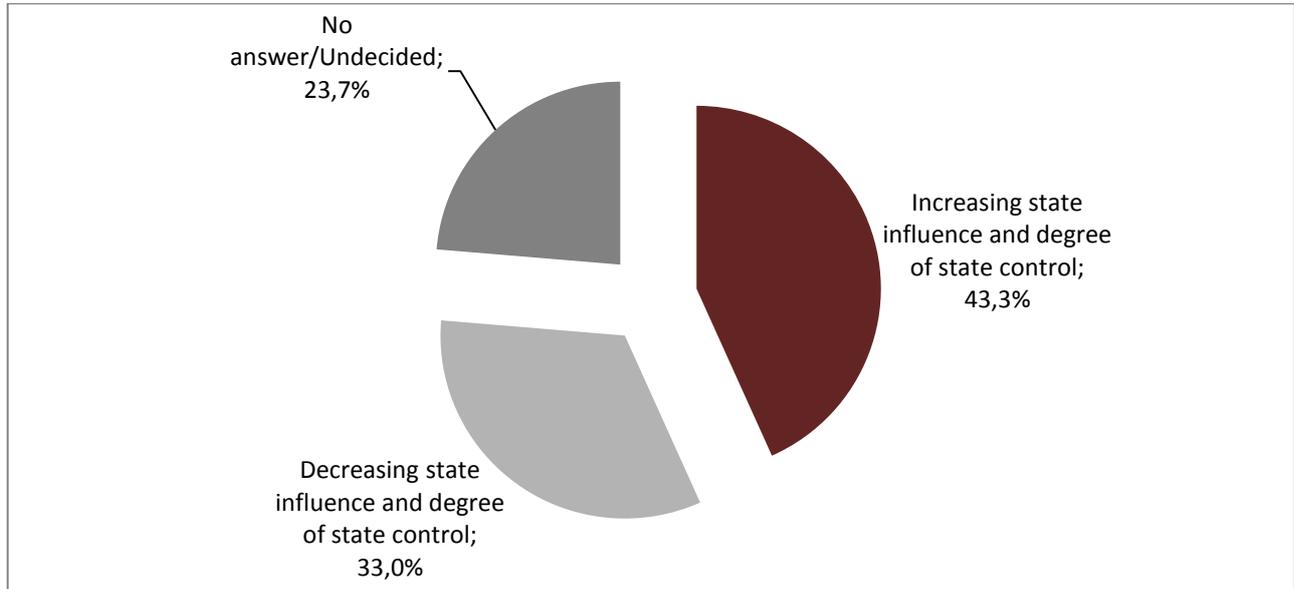
A simple practical conclusion can be drawn that the appeal of reforms in the eyes of the population as a whole can be enhanced if focus is placed on such factors as the future well-being of children, improvement of the respondents’ own financial status, and strengthening of Belarus as a state.

To reveal the general trend of reforms, the respondents were asked two questions: “In your opinion, which country should Belarus look like in terms of its social and economic development?” and “In your opinion, should reforms in various sectors of public life be aimed primarily at increasing or decreasing the role of the state and degree of state control?” Paradoxically, the Belarusians remain a nation with an anti-liberal disposition, in which the idea of institutional changes through a stronger regulation seems more attractive than the idea of reducing the role of the state. Specifically, the share of those supporting an extension in the influence of the state amounts to 43.3%, while the share of those calling for a more liberal model is 33%. Also noteworthy is the considerable share of the respondents who remained “undecided”. This may indicate a lack of clear political and economic orientations, as well as the absence of the individual vision of potential changes and awareness of effective alternatives. The distribution of answers to this question hardly depends on the age: liberal views slightly prevail only in the group of the

³ Change in Belarus’s public opinion concerning certain social, economic and political issues (based on nationwide polls conducted by the IISEPS, %), <http://iiseps.org/trends/11>.

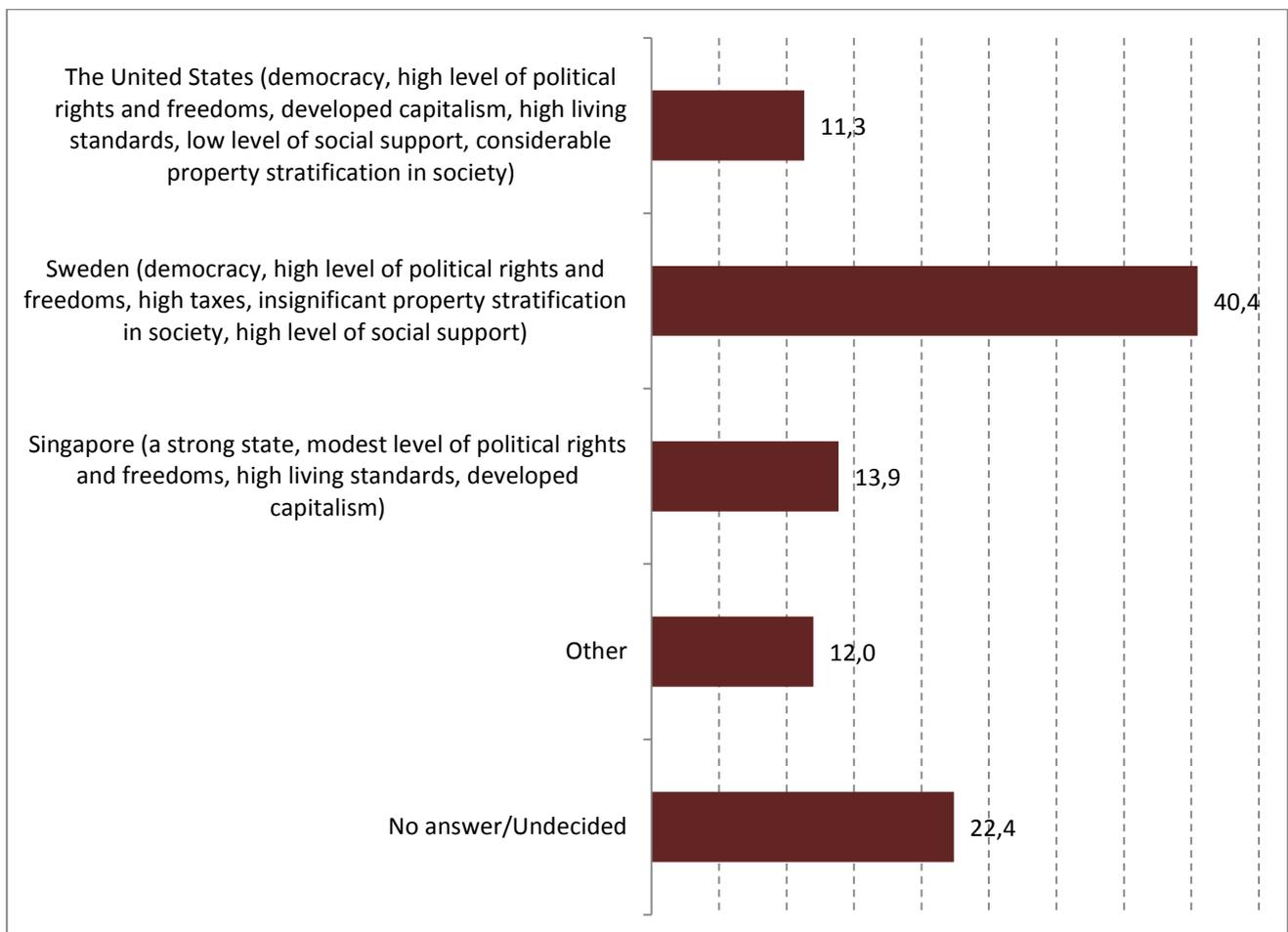
respondents aged between 16 and 29 (38% of them would like to see the influence of the state expand, while 42.7% call for a reduction in the role of the state).

Chart 2. Answers to the question "In your opinion, reforms in various sectors of public life should be aimed primarily at..."



The Belarusians see Sweden — a country with a high level of social support, high taxes and respect for all political rights and freedoms — as a model reformer that Belarus should look like.

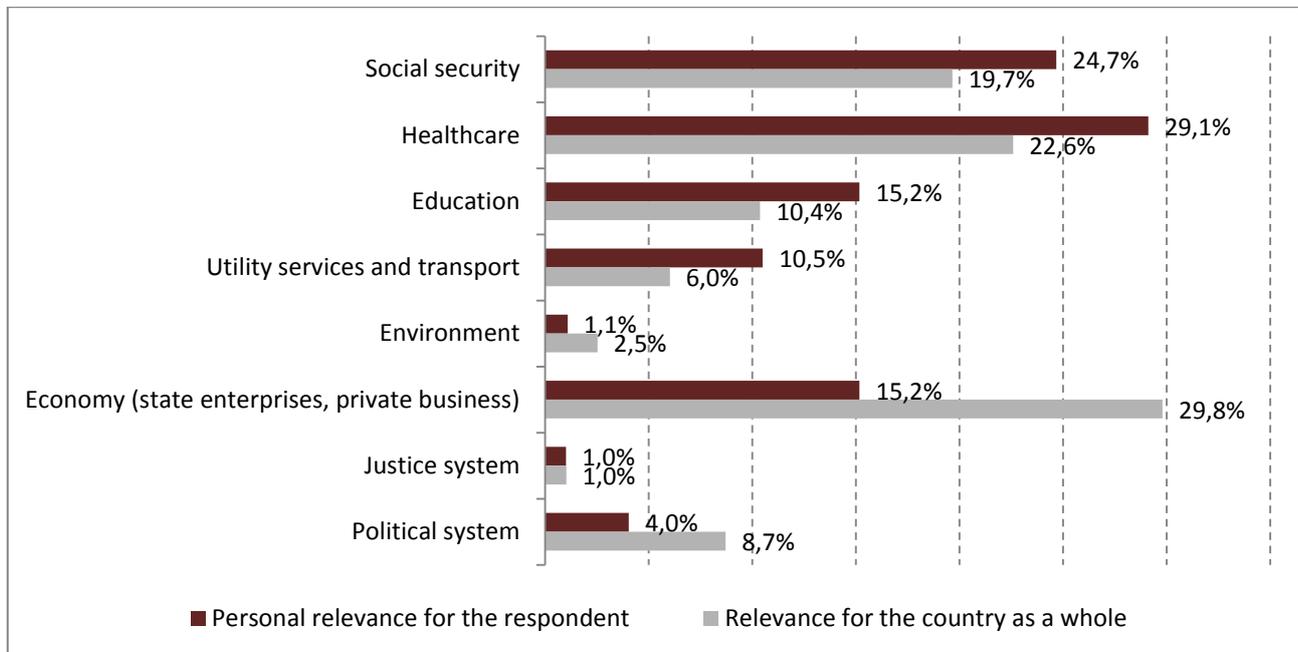
Chart 3. Answers to the question "In your opinion, which country should Belarus look like in terms of its social and economic development?"



2. Priorities and substance of reforms

To reveal the sectors of public life that require reforms most of all, the relevance of reforms personally for the respondents and for the state as a whole was assessed. Ranks were assigned to the sectors of public life that call for reforms to a greater or lesser degree, and it turns out that the vision of the most relevant reforms for the respondents themselves and the country as a whole differs quite significantly.

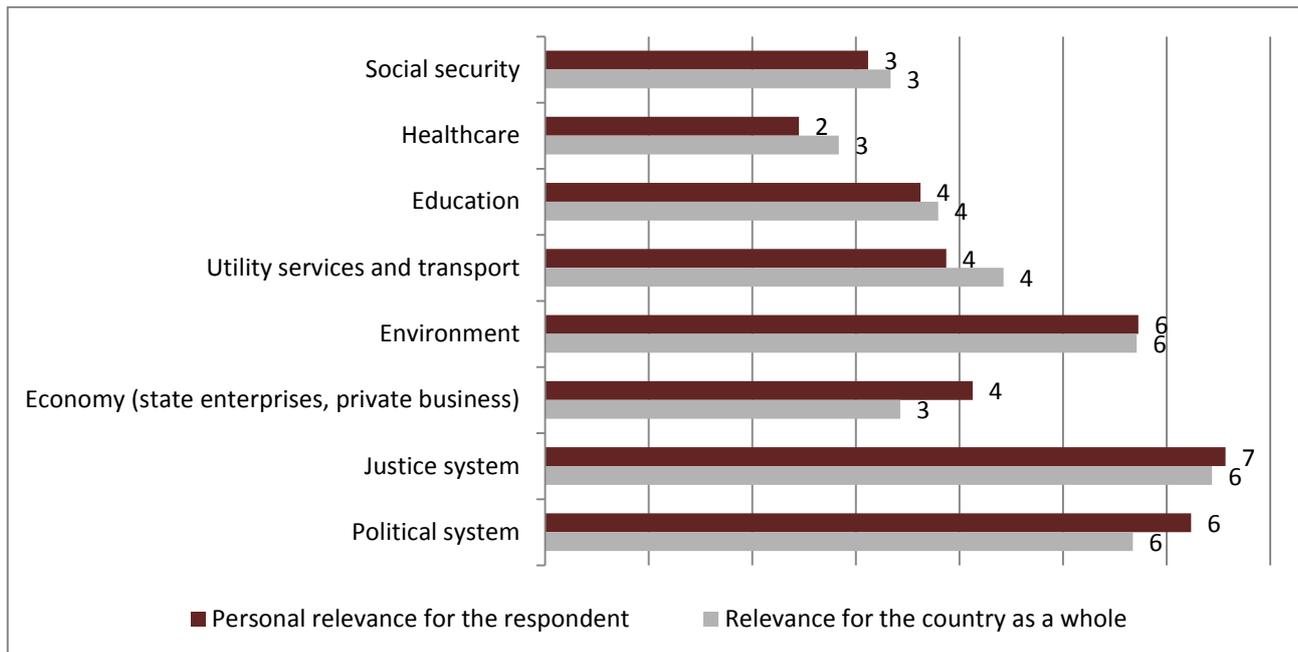
Chart 4. Share of the respondents giving certain sectors a priority status in terms of reforms



Based on the answers, the personal interest of the respondents in reforms focuses primarily on the reform of the healthcare system, which is followed by the social security system, whereas the national economy and education have ranks three and four. When it comes to the interests of the country as a whole, most of the respondents (29.8%) put the national economy in the first place.

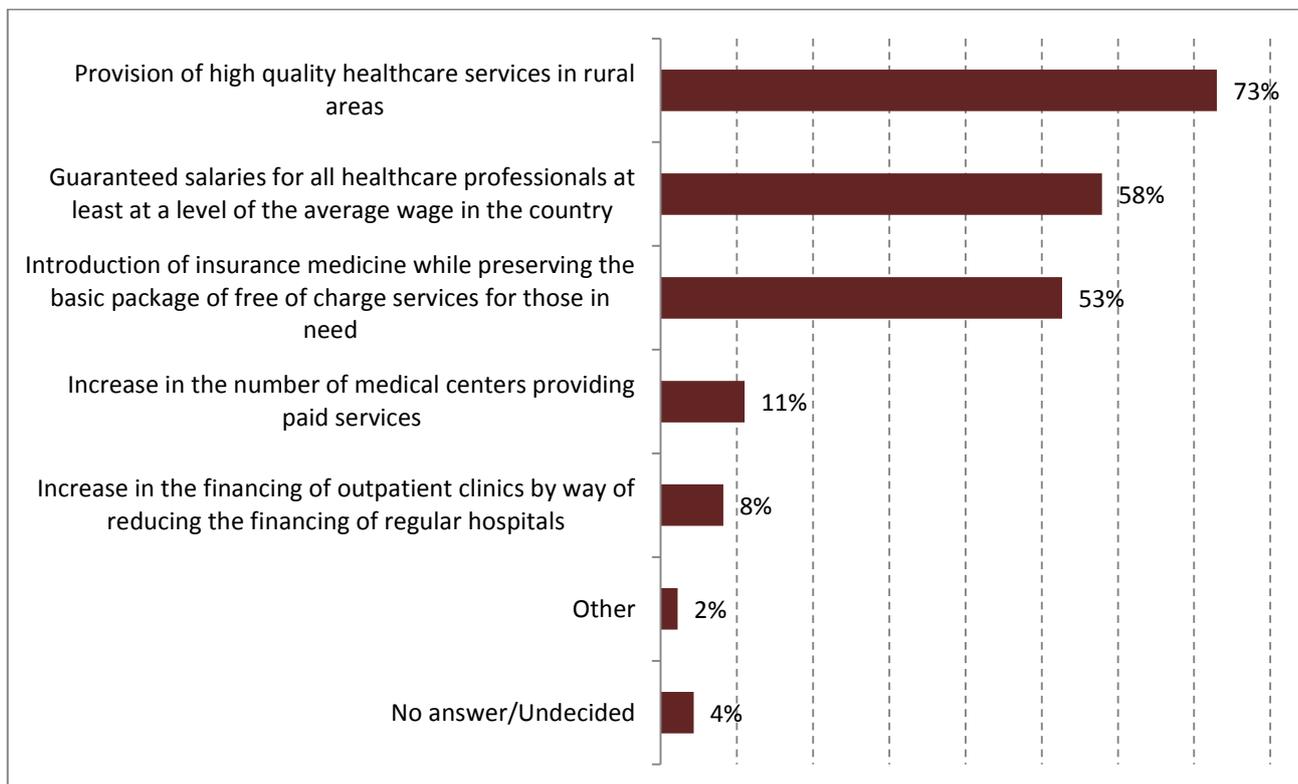
However, given the priority rankings of the sectors of public life that require reforms (on a scale 1 to 8), the gap between people's personal interests and the country as a whole narrows. Overall, the priority areas for reforms, based on the opinion of the population at large, look as follows: healthcare, social security, economy, education, utility services and transport, environment, and, concluding the list, the political and justice systems. As for the urgency of reforms, most of the respondents believe that reforms in healthcare, social security, economy, education, utility services and transport should be put in place in the near future, i.e. one or two years, whereas the environment, politics and the justice system are the sectors that do not need immediate reforms.

Chart 5. Rankings of the sectors requiring reforms (“mean values” in the overall rating, one a scale 1 to 8, where 1 indicates “reforms in the sector are required on a first priority basis”, and 8 stands for “reforms are required after all the other sectors”)



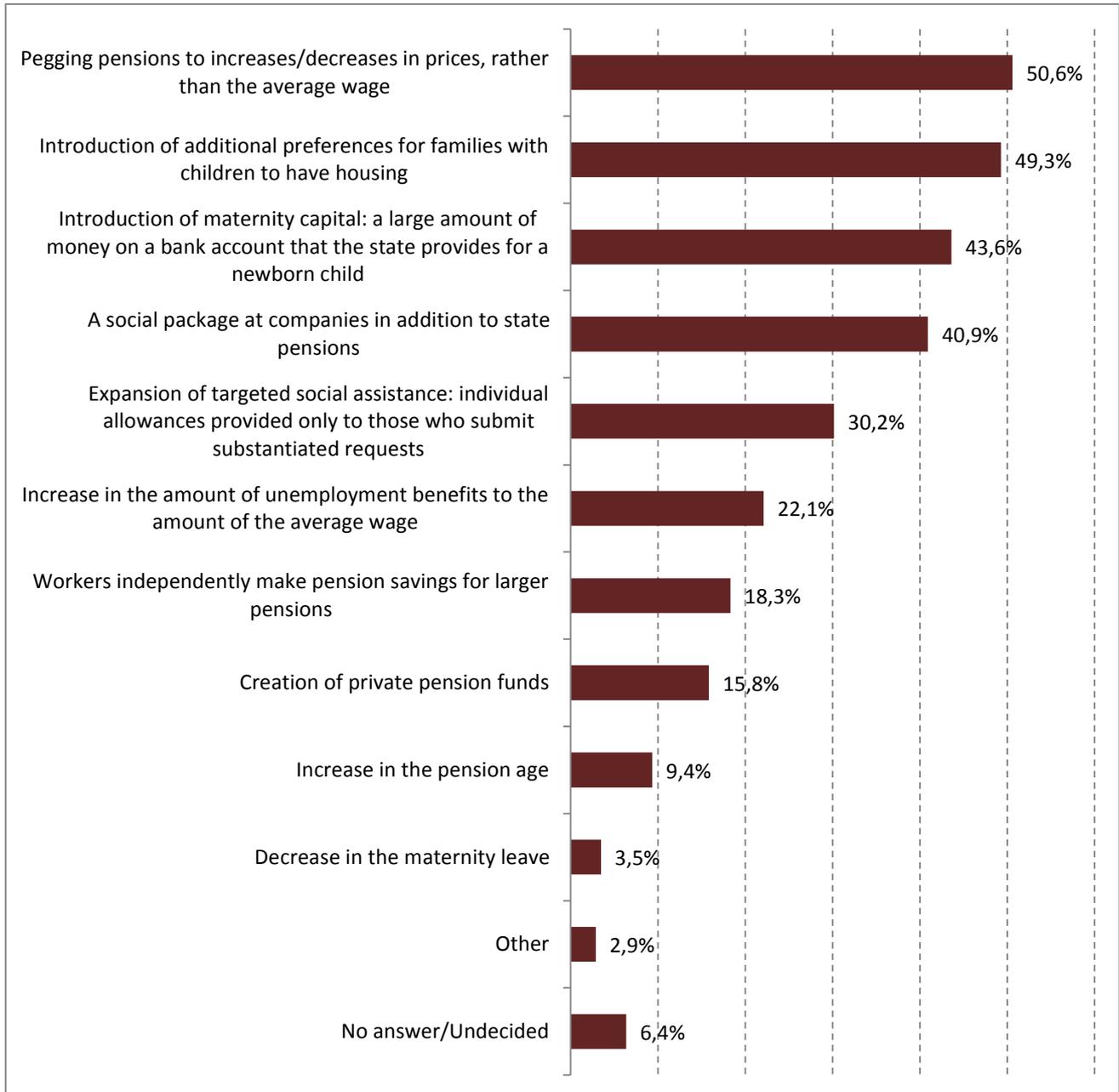
What should the reform of the healthcare system, social security, utility services, transport and economy as a whole look like, according to the respondents? Of those who believe that the healthcare system calls for reforms, 73% agree that the reform should result in high quality healthcare services in rural areas. More than half of them think that health professionals should be paid more (57.9%), and that Belarus should introduce insurance medicine while maintaining the basic package of free of charge medical services (52.7%).

Chart 6. Share of the respondents who answered the question “Is this measure necessary when reforming the healthcare system?” in the affirmative



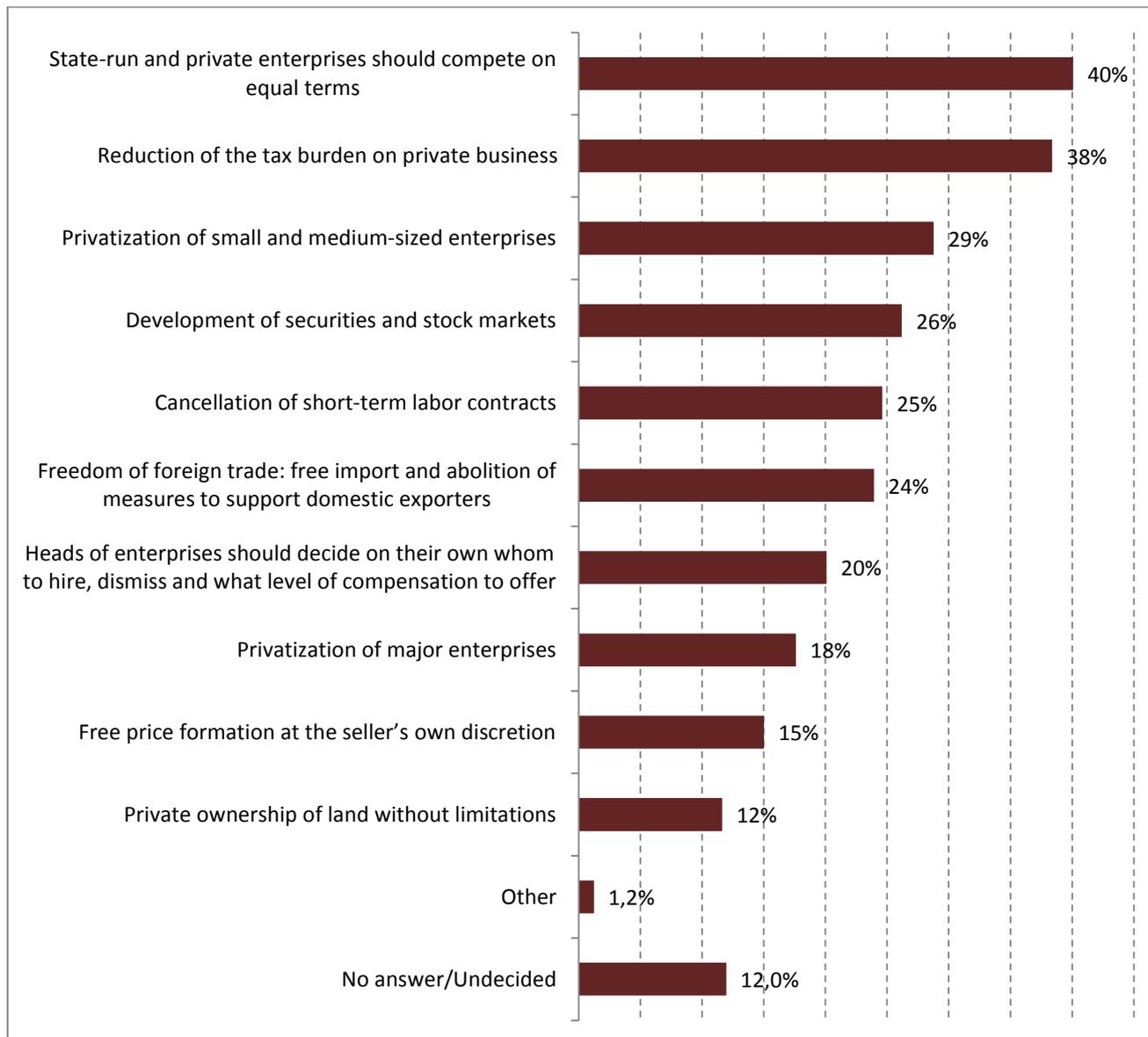
When it comes to the social security system, the population believes that a package of measures is required to reform it. First and foremost, pensions should be pegged to the inflation rate (50.6% of the respondents support this measure). Secondly, the respondents believe additional preferences are called for to provide housing for families with children (49.3%). The third and fourth priorities are the introduction of maternity capital (43.6%) and a social package of companies in addition to state pensions (40.9%).

Chart 7. Share of the respondents who answered the question "Is this measure necessary when reforming the social security system?" in the affirmative



Respondents differ when it comes to economic reforms, though, unlike the healthcare and social security sectors; however, considered together, anticipated measures can be regarded as liberal. Equal competition between state-controlled and private companies has the most supporters (40.1%), followed by a reduction in the tax burden on private companies (38.4%). However, radical liberal reforms (for instance, the introduction of private ownership of land, privatization of major state-owned enterprises and free price formation) are not welcome options.

Chart 8. Share of the respondents who answered the question "Is this measure necessary when reforming the economic system?" in the affirmative



The main measures to reform the education system are an increase in the salaries of the teaching staff (55.5%) and the autonomy of educational institutions (47.1%). The population at large also welcomes programs of state support for Belarusian students trained abroad (45.9%).

Despite the broad acceptance of the idea that reforms of utility services and transport are necessary, the population differs on arrangements to introduce this reform. The most popular measure is the transfer of management of utility services to associations of homeowners or private companies; however, it is supported by only 28.3% of the respondents.

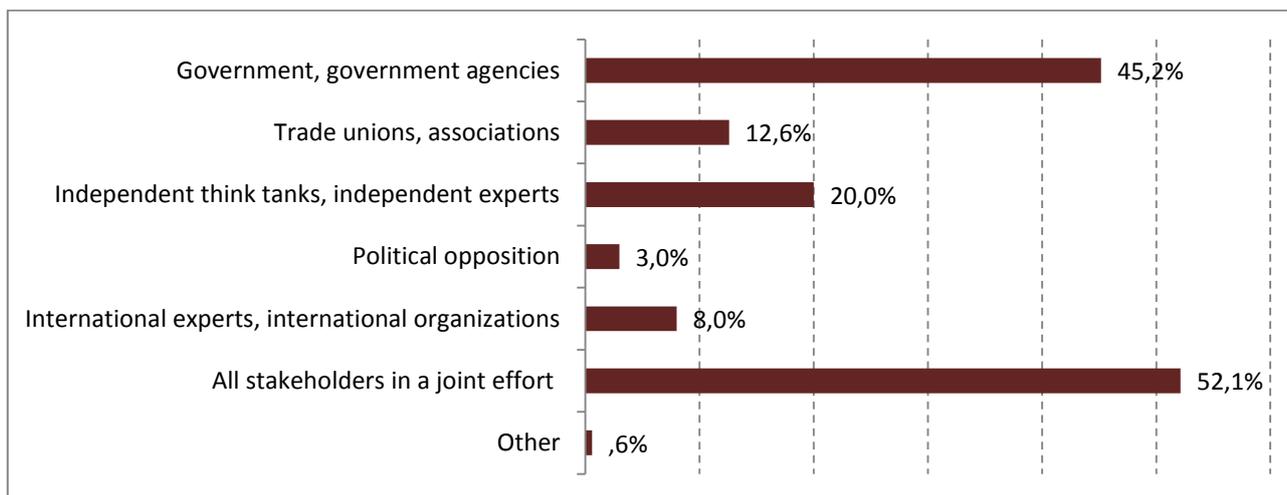
Therefore, when it calls for reforms in the systems of healthcare and education, the population wishes to achieve a higher quality of services via increases in salaries, rather than structural changes. Those who think that the social security system should be reformed, wish to see an additional support for young families, yet, they are ready to pass part of the responsibility for pension provision on to companies from the state. The way the population sees tentative economic reforms can be called moderate liberalization.

3. Who is supposed to develop and put in place reforms?

The Belarusians believe that the government is the main entity that should take up the responsibility to develop reforms – this is what 45.2% of the respondents think.

Although few respondents are ready to rely on third sector entities, political opposition and international organizations for shaping reforms, most of the population calls for involving all stakeholders in the process (52.1%). This points to the fact that the population at large has an overall positive attitude to the diversity of proposals and ideas.

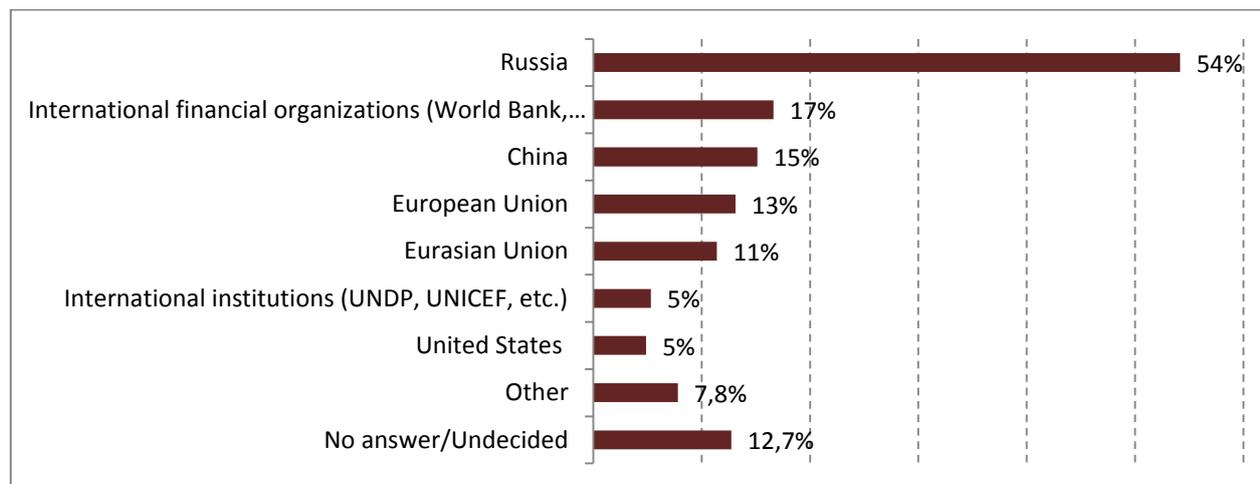
Chart 9. Answers to the question “In your opinion, who should develop reforms in Belarus?”



Asked who can help Belarus to put in practice structural reforms, most of the respondents said they expected help from Russia (54.2%). Apparently, this can be attributed to the fact that Russia is still perceived in Belarus as the most reliable source of financial assistance. The potential of other countries and international organizations is seen as low.

There are several possible reasons for this, including the Ukrainian demonstration effect and associated enhancement of euroscepticism in Belarus, as well as the impact of the official media. Further, based on the findings of a study organized by the Office for a Democratic Belarus in autumn 2013⁴, the EU is not regarded by the Belarusian population as a possible partner to introduce necessary reforms in healthcare and social security.

Chart 10. Answers to the question “In your opinion, who can help Belarus put in place structural reforms?”



⁴ Belarus and Eastern Partnership: National and European Values. Executive summary of the survey findings, <http://ru.democraticbelarus.eu/news/opros-obshchestvennogo-mneniya-belarus-i-vostochnoe-partnerstvo-natsionalnye-i-evropeiskie-tsen>

Key findings

- The Belarusians believe that reforms are necessary, to a varying degree, — 75.6% of the population says so. The share of those ready to endure the negative consequences of reforms is 51.1%. This points to the positive perception of reforms as a whole: the population has no consistently negative image of reforms, which could have been formed under the influence of Russian or CEE reforms.
- The Belarusians are ready to endure a decrease in living standards brought about by reforms for five to seven years for “pragmatic” (future of their children, their own well-being in the future) and “patriotic” (a strong, self-sufficient and independent Belarus) reasons. Integration projects are not perceived as sufficiently valuable to put up with the aftermath of reforms.
- According to a considerable portion of the population, reforms in Belarus should aim at increasing state influence in various sectors (43% support an increase in state influence, and 33% want the influence of the state to weaken). However, many citizens have no formed opinion, as 23.7% of the respondents were undecided. The vision of potential reforms is rather vague, and there is room for shaping public opinion on this matter. Most of the respondents believe that as a result of reforms Belarus should build a political, social and economic system similar to that of Sweden.
- The priority sector of public life for reforms is the healthcare system. Essential measures that should be incorporated in the reform include arrangements to improve the quality of medical services in rural areas, increase in the salary level of health professionals and introduction of insurance medicine with the simultaneous preservation of the basic package of free of charge services.
- The Belarusians mostly rely on the government and governmental organizations for the development of reforms. However, the majority is unwilling to see the government as the sole developer of reforms, as more than half of the respondents speak about the need for all stakeholders to join efforts, i.e. involve international organizations, independent think tanks and civil society entities in the development of reforms.
- As for the assistance in implementing structural reforms, Belarusian citizens pin hopes primarily on Russia, regarding it as the most probable source of financial support. Further, the Belarusians do not see other countries or international organizations as partners in putting in practice some of the much needed reforms.