

WHAT BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY THINKS ON REFORMS

Introduction

The success of reforms in Central and Eastern Europe came largely on the back of the inclusion of representatives of various groups, organizations and institutions in the shaping of the transformation policy. Politicians were encouraged to experiment and were effectively stopped from asserting interests of a single group of stakeholders. In this context, the inclusion of civil society in the transformation process becomes a crucial factor. A logical question is to which extent Belarusian civil society and political opposition are ready to be involved in the reform process and what attitude they have to reforms.

As part of the REFORUM¹ project, BISS conducted opinion polls among representatives of 101 third sector organizations and political opposition (hereinafter 'civil society', CS). The subject of the study is the attitude of CS representatives to introducing reforms in our country. The methodology for the study is outlined in Exhibit 1.

The main objectives of the study were to assess the general attitude to reforms and relevance of putting these reforms in practice, to identify the priorities and substance of the anticipated reforms, and to determine the extent, to which civil society is ready to participate in the development and implementation of reforms in Belarus.

Key findings of the study:

- Irrespective of the focus of the concerned organization, representatives of Belarusian civil society believe the reform of the political system to be the key priority for the reform process;
- CS representatives support political liberalization; however, they are less enthusiastic about full economic liberalization;
- CS representatives voice their willingness to participate in the development of reforms; however, overall, the respondents believe the potential of civil society in implementing reforms to be low and the current level of engagement between CS and the state to be insufficient and inefficient.

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

1. General attitude to reforms and key priorities

In order to identify the general attitude to reforms, representatives of CS organizations were asked whether Belarus needs reforms and whether these reforms should aim at strengthening or weakening the influence and control of the state. The respondents agree that the country requires reforms, and most of them support liberal reforms – those aiming at decreasing the role of the state and the degree of state control of various areas of public life. This attitude is what distinguishes representatives of civil society from the population as a whole²: 43% of the Belarusians support a stronger state control, and only 33% would like to see a weaker state control. Importantly, the population at large has a much higher share of those who could not answer (23%), which attests to the fact that CS representatives have a definite political position. The liberal views of CS representatives are not surprising: virtually two decades of support for Belarusian NGOs by their western partners resulted in the formation of an explicitly pro-liberal group.

Chart 1. Answers to the question “In your opinion, does Belarus require reforms?”

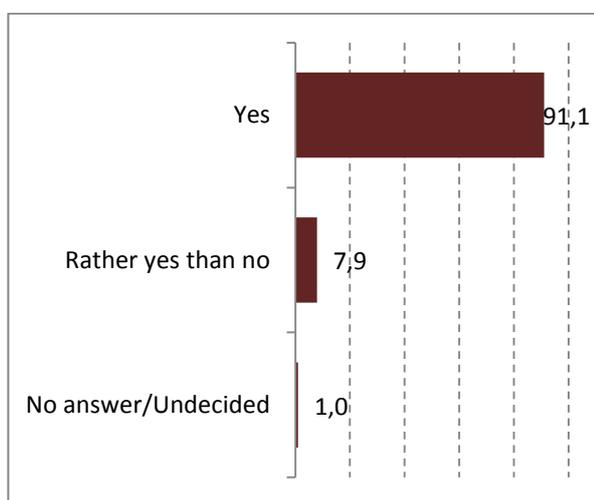
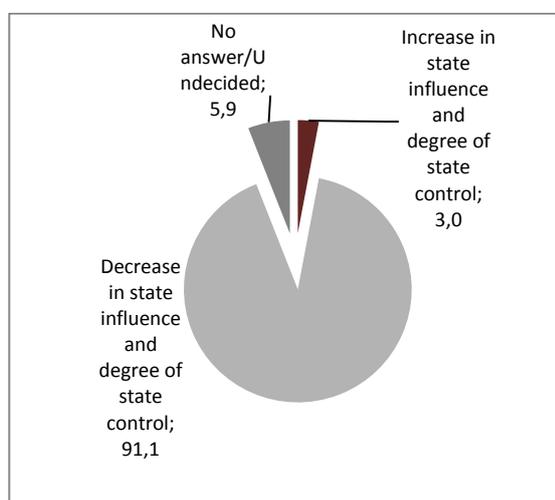


Chart 2. Answers to the question “In your opinion, reforms in various sectors of the country should be aimed at ...”



The majority of CS representatives are definitely (60%) or more likely (33%) ready to endure the negative consequences of reforms manifested in a reduction in living standards for five to seven years following the launch of reforms. Their basic motives are the improved welfare and additional opportunities for their children in the future (73%), a strong and independent Belarus (62%), and the European development path/integration with the EU (59%). The population as a whole is less willing to endure the negative consequences of reforms, with only 15% definitely ready to embrace them. Unlike civil society, the population at large does not regard the European development path as a value that is significant enough to put up with temporary reductions in living standards, whereas when it comes to the importance of “opportunities for children in the future” and “a strong and independent Belarus”, the population at large agrees with CS representatives.

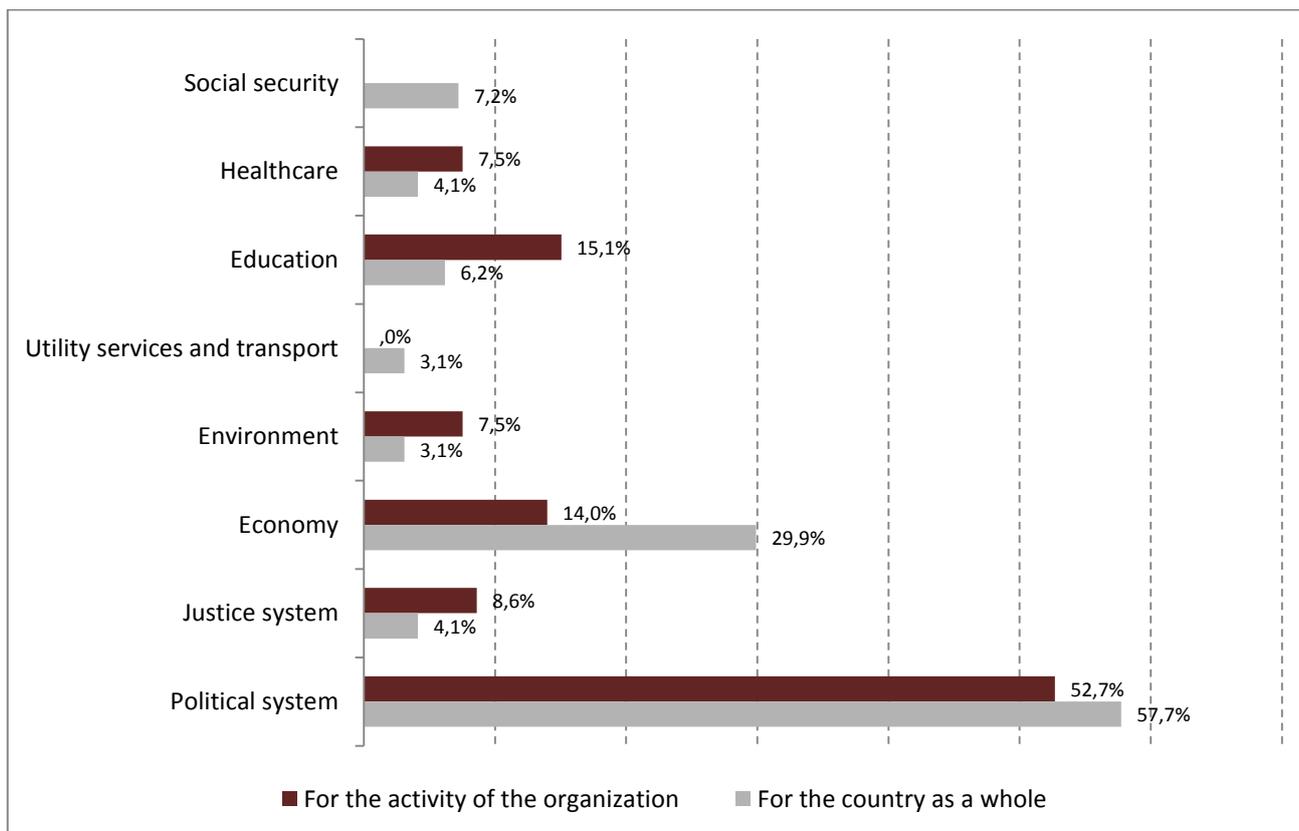
Furthermore, CS representatives are unanimous as to the sectors that call for reforms in the first place. The respondents identified priority areas for reforms based on two positions: those crucial for the country as a whole and those essential for their organization. Their visions of the interests of the country and interests of their organization from the point of view of requisite reforms coincide. This points to the fact that the respondents are quite consistent in assessing the priority rankings of reforms. The political sector became the top priority area for reforms by a wide

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 commissioned from Satio by BISS as part of the REFORUM project in March–April 2014.

margin when it came to both the interests of the organization and the country as a whole. More than half of CS representatives said that the political system was their number one priority for reforms. The second priority area for reforms (with 30% of the respondents making it their number one priority) for the country as a whole is the national economy. The economy and education have virtually equal proportions as far as the interests of public organizations are concerned.

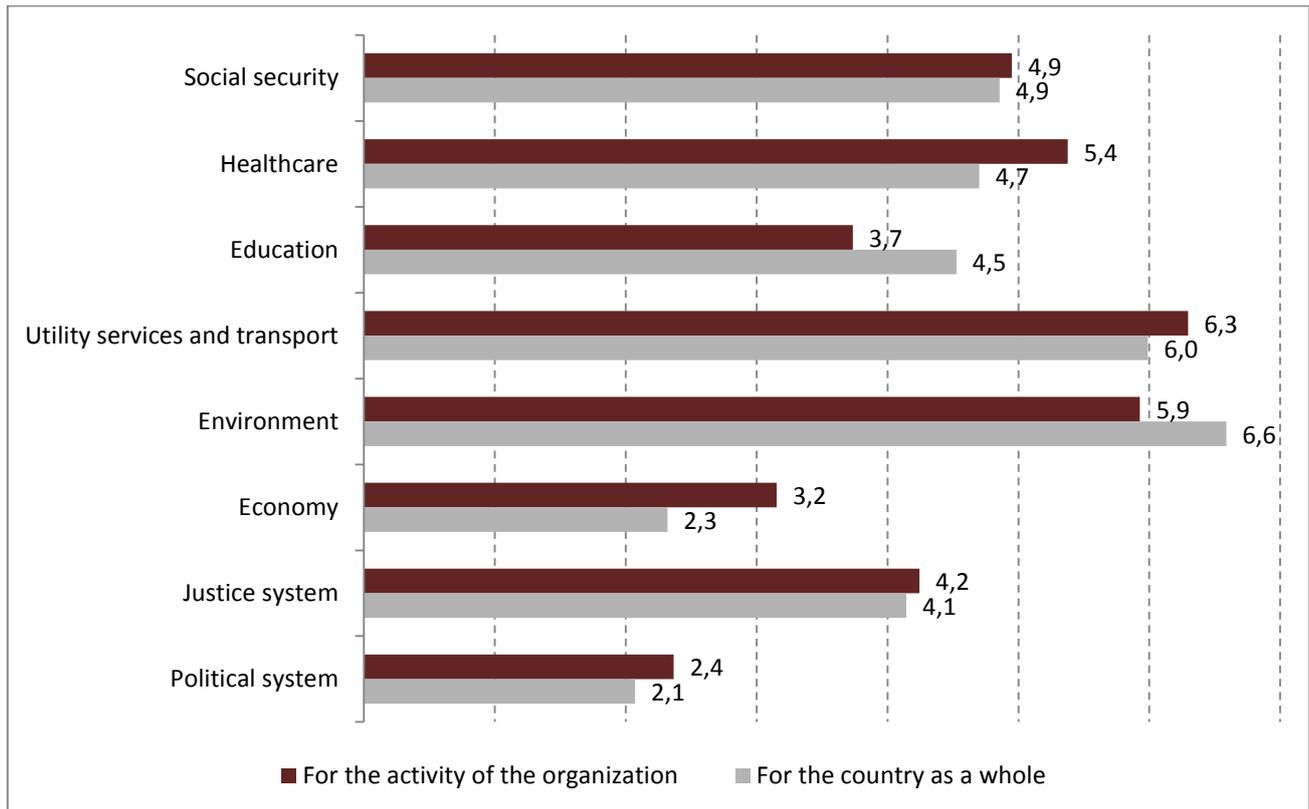
Politics is one of the least important sectors that require reforms, according to the population at large, whereas the healthcare system is the number one priority. Importantly, the interests of the country as a whole are substantially different for the population at large and CS representatives: the population believes that the chief priority sector for reforms in the context of the interests of the entire state is the country's economy.

Chart 3. Share of the respondents giving a single sector a priority status in terms of reforms



In order to identify priority sectors for reforms, the mean values of the priority positions can be utilized. Based on the mean values of various sectors, we can also say that for CS representatives, the interests of their organizations and the country as a whole are quite close. The chief priorities are politics (2nd position) and the economy (2nd–3rd positions), then come education and the justice system (4th position, on average), followed by social security and healthcare (5th position, on average), while utility services, transport and environment conclude the list (6th position, on average).

Chart 4. "Mean value" of a sector (ranging from 1 – "reforms in the sector are required on a first priority basis" to 8 – "reforms are required after all the other sectors")



Many CS organizations are working with problems associated with potential areas subject to anticipated reforms. It should be helpful to consider the priorities selected by organizations in linkage to their activities and regional distribution.

2. Attitude to reforms by sectors of public life

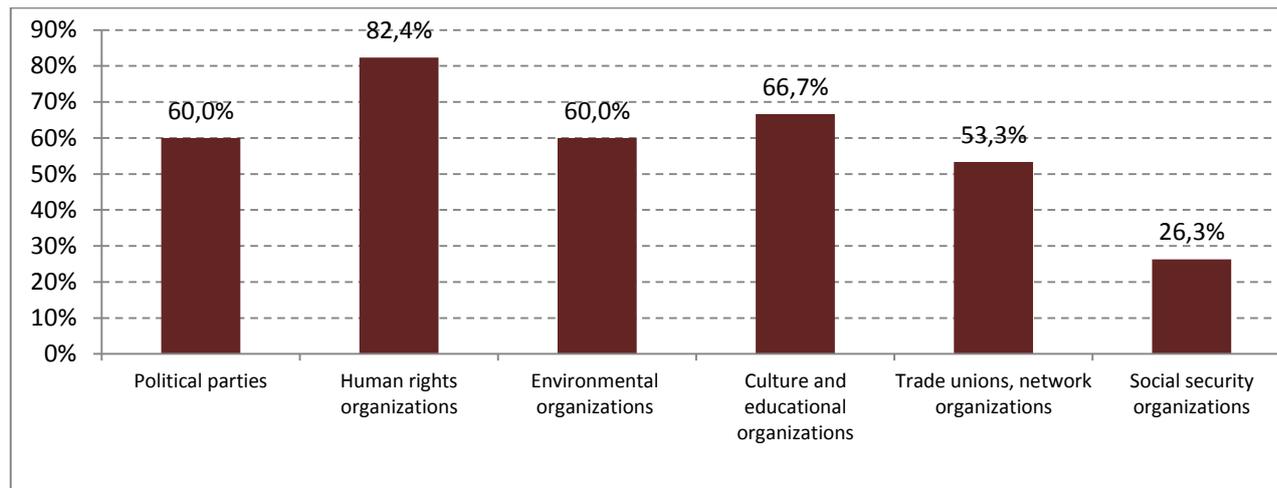
To describe the attitude of CS representatives to reforms in various sectors of public life we will consider differences in the priority rankings of reforms for each sector (for the country as a whole), as well as urgency of reforms, and understanding of the substance of reforms expressed in categories of specific arrangements. The sectors of public life will be addressed in descending order depending on the priority rank of reforms.

Politics

The political system is the number one area in terms of the necessity of reforms, both in the interests of CS organizations and the country as a whole. However, the relevance of political reforms markedly differs for various CS organizations depending on their activities.

Human rights organizations make the political system their number one choice for reforms more than any other organizations (82%). At the same time, only 26% of charities and social security organizations make the political system their top priority for reforms, less than all other CS organizations. However, given the high relevance of political reforms for non-political organizations (culture and education – 67%, environment – 60%), civil society appears to be highly interested in reforms of the political system. It is noteworthy that the proportion of Minsk-based organizations that make political reforms their top priority remains higher than that of regional organizations (63% and 44%, respectively).

Chart 5. Share of the respondents believing political system reforms to have priority (interests of the country as a whole)



When it comes to the best timeframe for reforms, 80% believe it necessary to put them in place within the next year or two. Another 18% of the respondents believe that the political system should be reformed in the medium term, i.e. within three to five years.

CS representatives believe that the following measures are equally important to reform the political system: **an increased role of the parliament, election of heads of executive committees, possibility for citizens to receive complete information about budget allocation, expenditures, compensation packages of officials, and amendments to the election legislation with a view to increasing the transparency of elections and providing control instruments** — each of these arrangements is supported by at least 75% of the respondents.

Economy

The national economy is the second most important sector requiring reforms for the country as a whole and third most important area for CS organizations. It is most frequently mentioned as their number one priority by charities and social security organizations (47%). Human rights organizations, which are especially interested in promoting political reforms, make the economy their priority less than any other organizations. Regional organizations believe reforms in the economy to be more relevant than Minsk-based organizations, which can be attributed to the fact that living standards are traditionally higher in the capital city. Forty-four percent of regional organizations put economic reforms in the first place, whereas only 24% of Minsk organizations make the economy their priority.

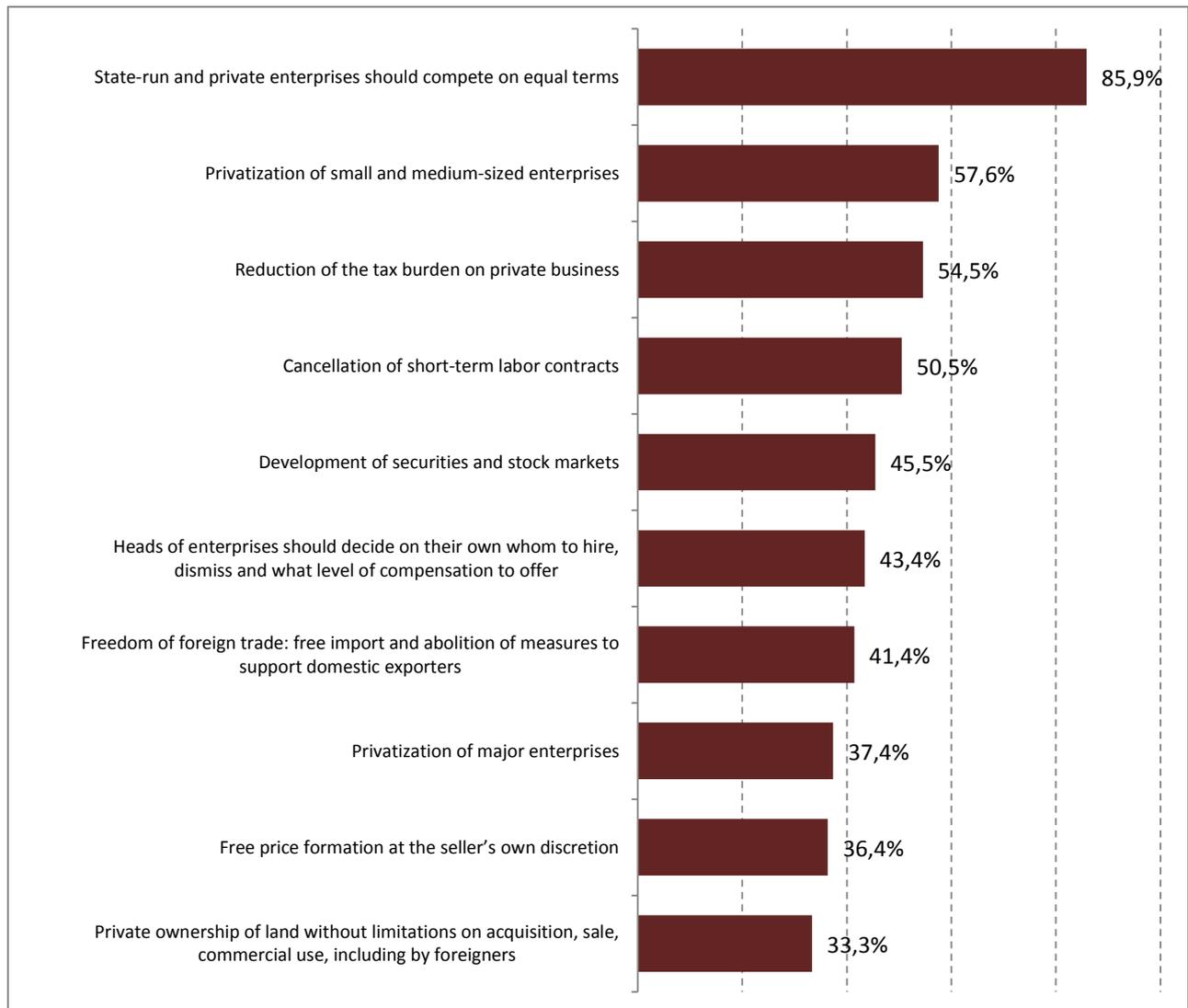
Chart 6. Share of the respondents believing economic reforms to have priority (interests of the country as a whole)



Most of the respondents (86%) believe that the economy should be reformed as soon as possible, i.e. within the next year or two.

When it comes to the substance of economic reforms, representatives of civil society (and the population at large) call for moderate liberalization. The majority of the respondents (86%) support the idea of offering equal conditions for state-controlled and private companies, and more than half of the respondents call for the privatization of small and medium-sized enterprises and reducing the tax load on private business. However, the least popular measures of those proposed are private ownership of land without limitations (supported by 33% of the respondents), free pricing (36%) and privatization of major enterprises (37%).

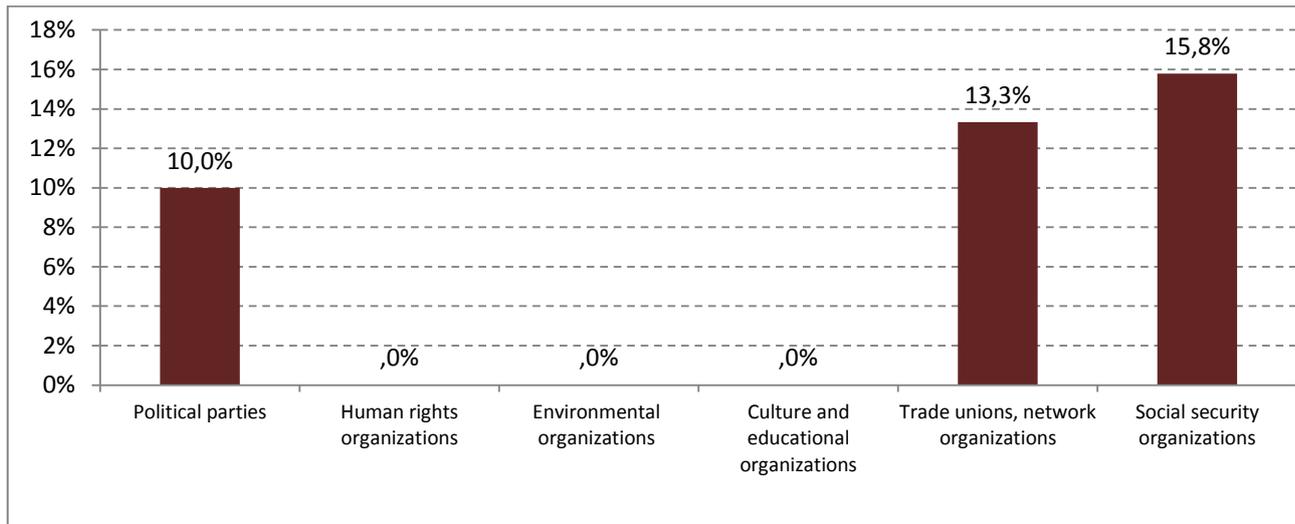
Chart 7. Answers to the question “When you say that reforms are required in the listed sectors, which measures do you have in mind?”



Education

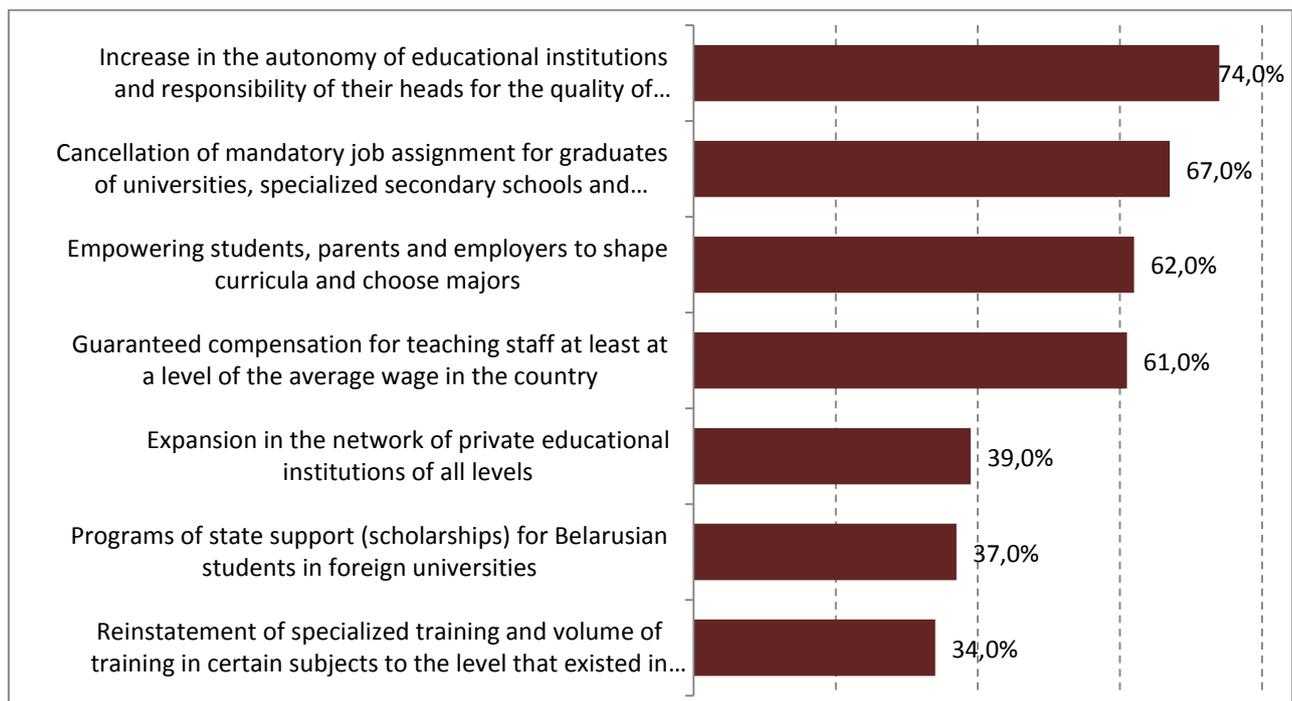
When choosing areas for reforms that are instrumental to the development of their organizations, the respondents name the system of education as their second priority. However, only 16% of charities and social security organizations, 13% of trade unions and network organizations and 10% of political parties call education their top priority for reforms. At the same time, CS representatives believe reforms in education to be long overdue, as 60% are certain that reforms should be put in place within a year or two, and 33% believe reforms will be necessary within the next three to five years.

Chart 8. Share of the respondents believing education reforms to have priority (interests of the country as a whole)



With regard to the substance of reforms in education, the respondents most frequently refer to the increase in the independence of educational institutions (74%), cancellation of mandatory job assignments following graduation (67%), empowering of students and employers to shape curricula (62%) and guaranteed salaries for teaching staff at least at a level of the average wage in the country (61%).

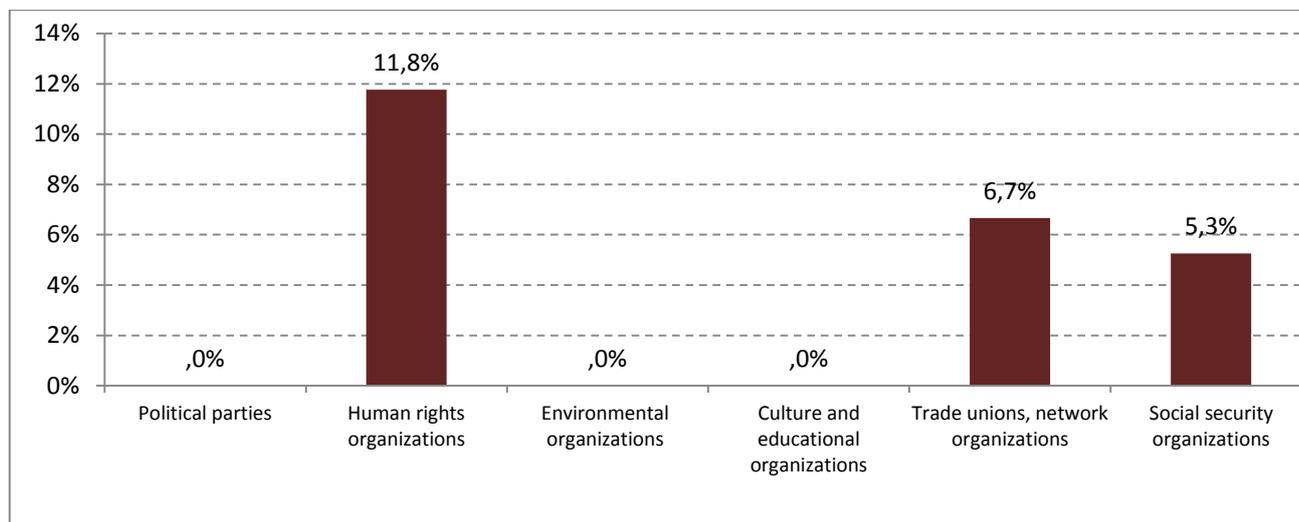
Chart 9. Answers to the question "When you say that reforms are required in the listed sectors, which measures do you have in mind?"



Justice system

On average, reforms of the justice system have rank four on the priority list of civil society entities (this applies to both interests of organizations and the state as a whole). It is the number one priority for quite few organizations, though, as only 12% of human rights organizations, 7% of trade unions and network NGOs, and 5% of social security organizations believe the justice system to be the sector that requires reforms more than any other sphere of public life.

Chart 10. Share of the respondents believing justice system reforms to have priority (interests of the country as a whole)



CS representatives also believe that reforms of the justice system should be expedited: 68% of the respondents think that reforms should be introduced in the near future. Eighty-seven percent of CS representatives agree that one of the necessary measures is the independence of the three branches of government. Most of the respondents agree that judges must not be appointed and relieved of their post by the president (77%) and that citizens must be enabled to apply to the Constitutional Court (67%).

Social security and healthcare

Reforms of the social security system and healthcare are lower on the priority list of CS organizations. These sectors are called top priorities by the organizations specializing in social security and charity: 21% and 12% of these organizations, respectively, believe reforms of the social security system and healthcare to be more important than any other reforms.

However, reforms of the social security system and healthcare are not considered as urgent as those of the political system, the national economy and education. Most of the respondents (39%) believe reforms of the social security system can be put in place in the medium term (three to five years). As for the healthcare system, the respondents are divided: 44% believe that reforms should be introduced in the near future, and the same proportion of CS organizations recommends medium-term reforms.

Reforms of the social security system appear to be more relevant for Minsk-based organizations. Whenever CS representatives talk about reforms in this sector, they refer to the creation of private pension funds (68%); whereas the most important components of the healthcare system reform are the introduction of insurance medicine (79%) and provision of high quality healthcare services in rural areas and small towns (72%).

Utility services, transport and environment

Reforms of utility services, transport and environment are at the very bottom of the priority list. Most of CS representatives believe that these reforms can be postponed for three to five years (45% for utilities and transport and 50% for the environment). These reforms are more relevant

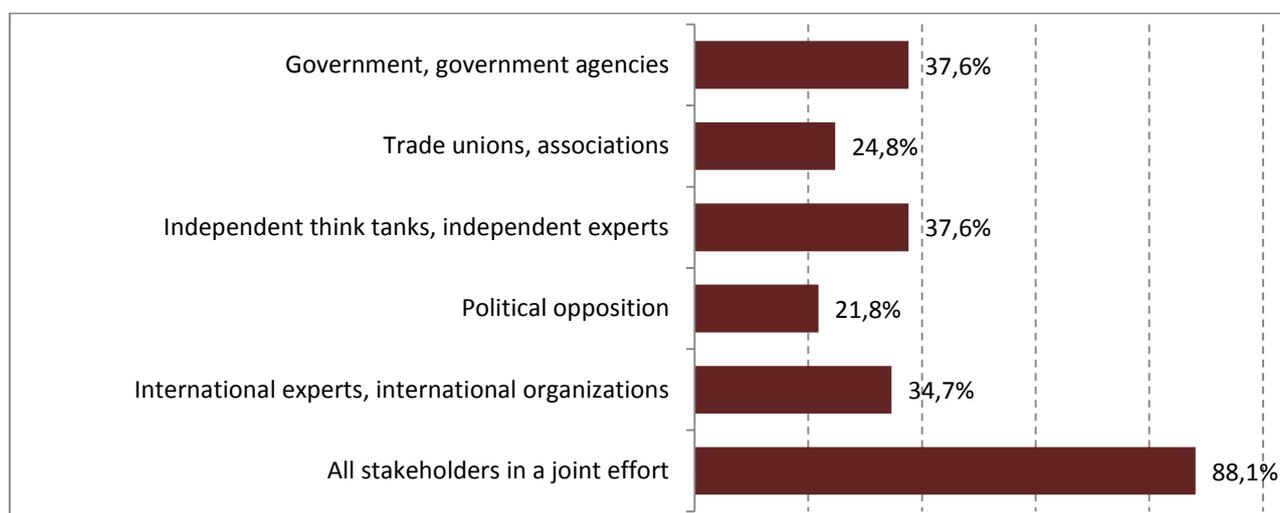
for Minsk-based organizations (4% of Minsk organizations call these sectors their top priority for reforms).

The main proposed arrangement concerning reforms in the utility services and transport sectors is the transfer of management in these enterprises to private entities (78%). In environment, anticipated reforms comprise the creation of a framework to take account of opinions of local residents regarding projects that affect the environment of concerned territories, and protection of conservation areas (nature reserves, wildlife sanctuaries) against construction, industry and agriculture (82% and 78%, respectively).

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

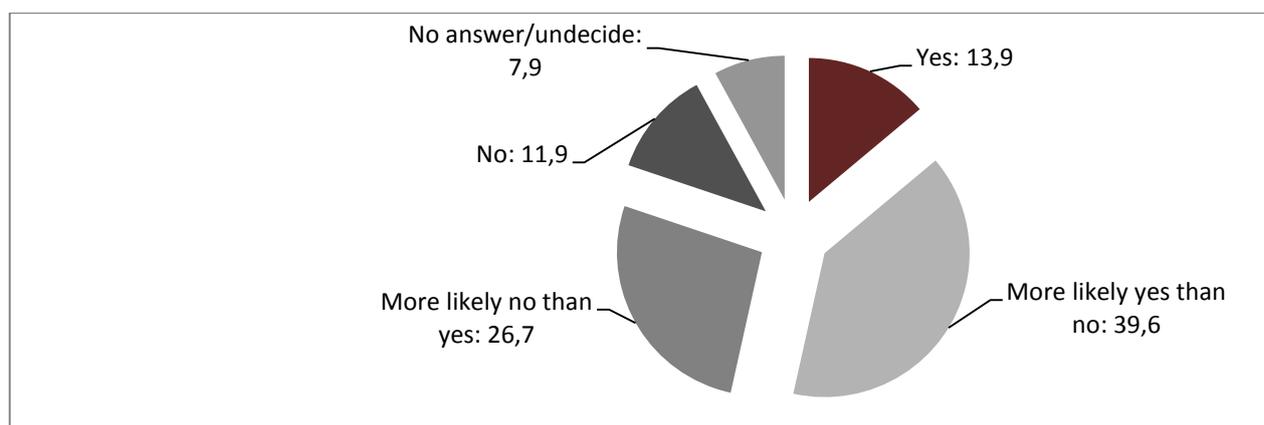
When asked who should develop reforms in Belarus, most of the respondents say that reforms should result from a concerted effort of all stakeholders (88%). Government agencies, independent experts and international organizations are most frequently named among individual entities responsible for developing reforms; whereas the political opposition is at the bottom of the list of potential drafters of reforms. Opposition parties would make government authorities and opposition forces equally responsible for adopting reforms (50% and 50%).

Chart 11. Answers to the question "In your opinion, who should develop reforms in Belarus?"



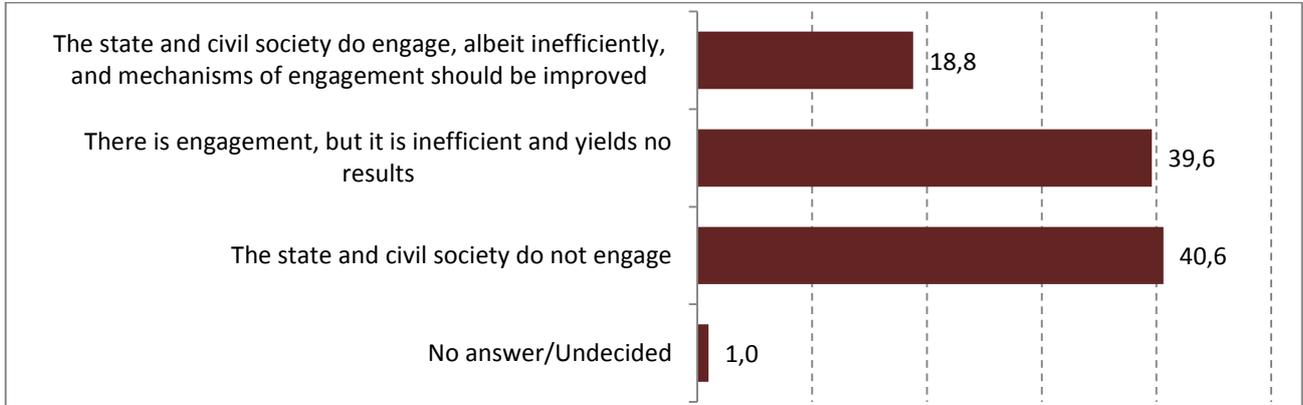
CS organizations are often willing to develop proposals for reforms: 63% say they are absolutely ready, 29% say they are more likely ready. However, when asked whether CS organizations are ready to take the responsibility to reform the country, only 14% of the respondents said "definitely, yes."

Chart 12. Answers to the question "In your opinion, are NGOs and the opposition ready to take the responsibility to reform the country?"



The degree of engagement between the state and civil society is considered to be low. Eighty percent of the respondents insist that there is no engagement or that it is inefficient and yields no results. None of the respondents say that this engagement is highly efficient, and only 19% admit there is some effect, albeit insignificant.

Chart 13. Answers to the question “What is your assessment of the engagement between the state and civil society?”



According to CS representatives, Belarus can expect help in introducing structural reforms primarily from the European Union (71%) and international financial institutions (63%). At the same time, the population at large believes that help can come primarily from Russia (54%).

Key findings

- Civil society representatives believe that the political system is the sector that requires reforms more than any other sector of public life, followed by the national economy and the education scheme.
- CS representatives call for political liberalization, reduction in state influence and control, introduction of insurance medicine and development of private pension funds. They are not as enthusiastic about the full liberalization of the national economy, specifically, the privatization of major enterprises or private ownership of land. The reform of the political system is understood as an increased role of the parliament, election of heads of executive committees, possibility for citizens to receive complete information about budget allocation, and amendments to the election legislation.
- Unlike the population at large, civil society organizations prioritize the European development path, whereas when it comes to support in the implementation of reforms, they pin hopes on the European Union and international organizations.
- Although the respondents believe the current level of the engagement between civil society and the state is insufficient and inefficient, most of third sector representatives advocate joint efforts of all stakeholders in the development of reforms. CS organizations most frequently express their willingness to participate in the development of reform proposals.

Exhibit 1. Methodology of the study

The study was conducted through personal interviews based on a structured questionnaire with representatives of organizations operating in various areas. The sample of organizations was formed in the following way. The database of organizations (source — www.ngo.by) was used to select the areas of activities with at least 100 organizations, except for the categories comprising narrow social groups (ethnic minorities, military, etc.) and affinity groups (sports, recreation, hobbies). The following areas of activities were chosen: environmental organizations, charities and social security organizations, human rights organizations, culture, education and awareness organizations. Political parties, trade unions and network public organizations formed individual groups.

Given the fact that the activity of the listed organizations is often valuable to the community, they were represented in the structure of the sample on a parity basis (depending on the availability of respondents) irrespective of the number of organizations picked for each area of activity. Further, it was necessary to take into account the opinion of not only central secretariats, but also regional divisions/regional public organizations, which prompted their inclusion in the structure of the sample.

The sample includes 101 organizations (one respondent represented each organization). The size of the subsample for each area of activity is not enough to draw statistically valid conclusions; however, it makes it possible to identify the main trends and patterns in the attitude of third sector organizations to reforms.

Description of the sample

