

Evolution of economic values in Belarus

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Summary

This policy brief examines and decomposes in detail values orientation and economic values in particular. An analysis of their dynamics in Belarus indicated that common economic — not political — values became the unifying factors for Belarusians of different age groups in 2020.

Introduction

Taking into account such a feature of the authoritarian regime as the stimulation of non-participation of the population in political life, the scale and duration of the protests in 2020 seemed to be an unexpected and even unusual phenomenon. However, was this the case? Were there other non-political factors that would help not only explain the essence of the protests but also get to know Belarusians a little better? In this study, we try to trace the transformation that Belarusian society has gone through, and we do it through the lens of economic values. Purportedly, the evolution of the economic values of Belarusians influenced the protest more than it might seem.

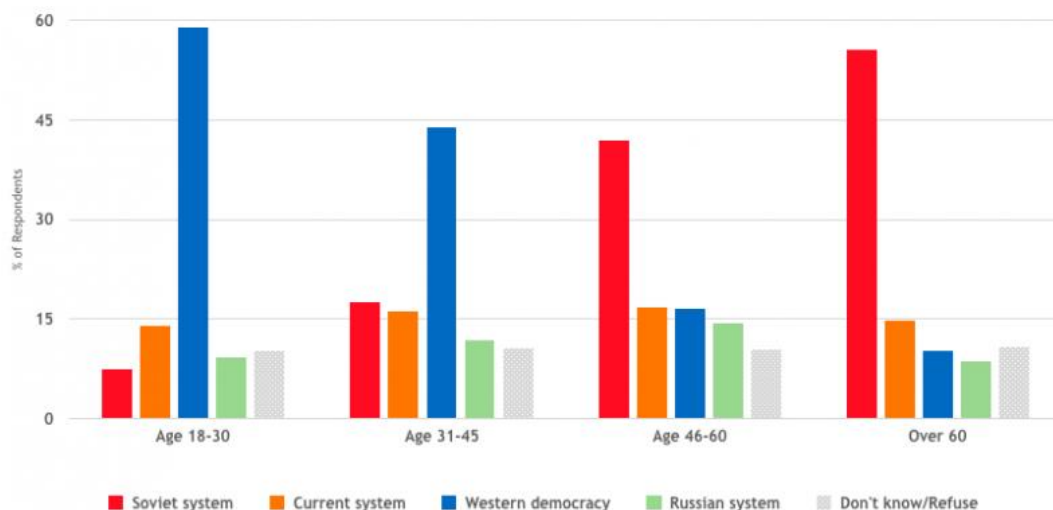
This paper is not the first attempt when researchers have become interested in the values and beliefs of Belarusians [1, 2]. For example, the work titled “Belarus and Neighbors” [3] reviews the worldview aspects of value systems. Based on the cluster analysis method, Belarus has been

assigned to the group of “(Post) authoritarian” countries characterized by the lack of preponderance of importance of any life domains (family, work, friends, religion, politics, and leisure time) compared to other groups of countries. Nevertheless, for Belarusians, politics is the last item of importance, and family, work, and friends are the top three. More curious is the fact that in the mid-1990s Belarus found itself in the “(Post) authoritarian” group of countries due to the transition from the more “progressive” “Liberal-Technicist” group.

In this regard, this study hypothesizes that despite the political detachment of Belarusian society, there were unifying factors that helped solidify Belarusians during the protests in 2020 (and earlier, at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic). One of the key factors of such solidarity was likely the transformation of economic value systems, which influenced most of the age groups of Belarusian society.

A study conducted by Global Voices in January 2020 [4] notes a serious gap between generations of Belarusians on several key political issues: attitudes towards the collapse of the Soviet Union; the vision of the main geopolitical power; the preferred political system, etc. For example, the idea of Western democracy is more popular among people aged 18-45, and the Soviet political system is more popular among older respondents (Figure 1).

Figure 1. What is the best political system?

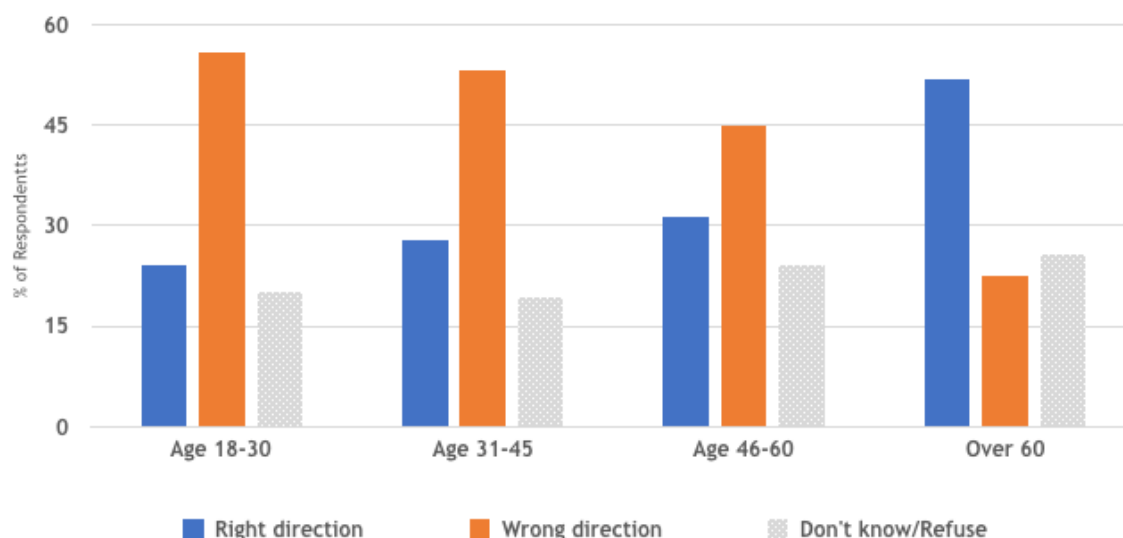


Source: [4]

At the same time, about 51% of respondents aged 18-60 note that “the general direction that the country moves in” is wrong (about half of

respondents aged 60+ note the opposite, see Figure 2). In this regard, a natural question arises: why do generations mostly agree on the wrong direction of the country's development despite different political preferences? The answer can be found using a more detailed examination of the values of Belarusians.

Figure 2. The general direction of Belarus – right or wrong?



Source: [4]

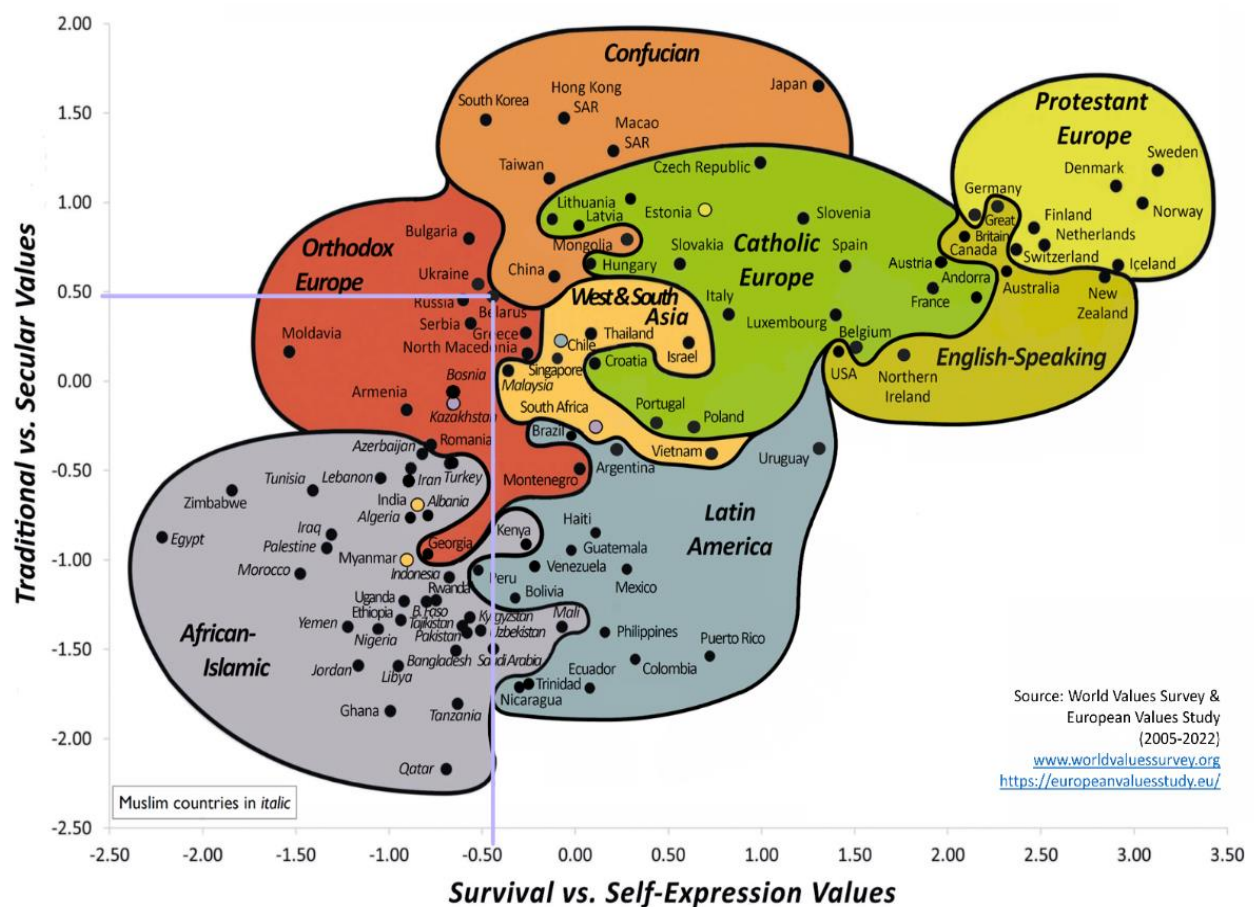
1. Cultural Map

Over the years, researchers have tried to develop a composite indicator that captures people's opinions, beliefs, and values as broadly as possible. As a result of these efforts, a team of experts conducting the World Values Survey (WVS) proposed such a composite index and presented it on the Cultural Map, categorizing countries into blocs. For example, the Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map (Figure 3) demonstrates cultural differences between countries in two aggregated indicators: the vertical axis, which is Traditional Values versus Secular-Rational Values, and the horizontal axis, which is Survival Values versus Self-Expression Values [5]. It is important to note that the position of societies of different countries on the Cultural Map in no way determines their level of both cultural and economic development; although there is a pattern that the most economically developed nations are in the upper right corner of the map. This is only a mapping of the current value orientations of societies.

According to the map compiled based on the results of the 2017-2022 surveys, the value orientation of Belarusians can be characterized as follows:

1. Belarusians are in the realm of Secular values, which imply a low importance of religion, a low level of respect for authority, a relatively equal distribution of house chores, and loyalty to divorce and abortion.
2. Survival Values are typical for Belarusians: economic and physical safety is much more important for the population than the Values of Self-Expression and quality of life; respondents consider themselves not very happy, tolerant, or trusting other people.

Figure 3. The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, 2023 (World Values Survey 7)

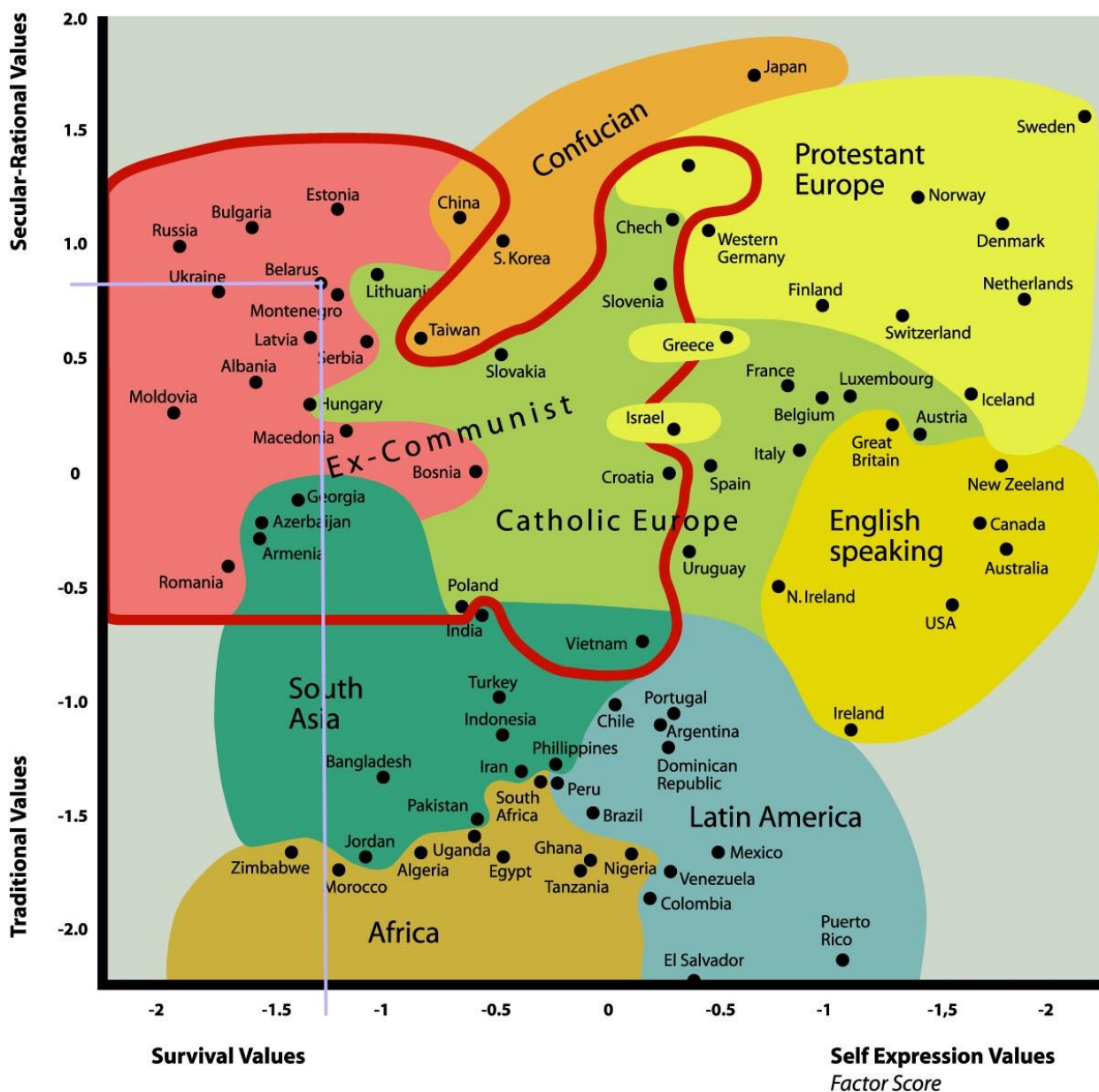


Source: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

It is noteworthy that for Belarusians, in 1996, the indicators of Secular Values and Survival Values (rather than Self-Expression Values) were evaluated higher compared to the last wave of the survey, which is generally explained by the socio-economic situation in the 1990s (Figure 4). However, there has not been any fundamental shift towards Secular Values and Self-Expression Values since then. (Moving from bottom to top on the map means the transition of society from Traditional Values to Secular Values; moving from left to right means the transition of society from Survival Values to Self-Expression Values). At the

same time, the transformation of the economic values of Belarusians has become noticeable: in the study of the Global Index of Economic Mentality (**GIEM**), Belarus ranked 15th among 76 countries (as of 2020) [6]. This index indicated the degree of transition from the so-called “state mentality” to the “free market mentality”, where a high ranking means the priority of private property, free competition, and personal responsibility.

Figure 4. The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, 1996 (World Values Survey 4)



Source: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

At the same time, it is important to note that most of the countries of the post-socialist bloc are in the second half of the ranking. In particular, Russia and Ukraine, neighboring Belarus, ranked 71st and 74th, respectively. As with the Cultural Map, a country's GIEM ranking does not identify its

economic development: the index is not calculated by using GDP indicators of countries; it is focused on how societies evaluate the importance of economic freedoms and development.

2. Methodology

The main source of data for the above studies is the World Values Survey (WVS) [7], which, since 1981, has been studying the values and beliefs of people in almost 100 countries, as well as the European Values Study (EVS) [8, 9]. Along with political, social, religious, and cultural topics, the study presents a block of questions about economic values, which, among other things, have been used to generate the GIEM rating. By now, 7 waves of the World Values Survey have been completed, and 4 of them have covered Belarus. The last wave of the survey (2017-2022) was conducted in conjunction with the European Values Survey in 2018.

The following countries were selected for comparison: Ukraine and Russia as neighboring countries with a common Soviet past; Czechia and Slovakia as post-socialist countries, but with “more” market economic systems, and they have joined the EU. As some questions were concerned, Sweden was a benchmark of an economically successful country with a large-scale social policy (and a high GIEM ranking: top 3).

All questions used WVS/EVS are measured with a scale from 1 to 10, at the ends of which there are opposite statements on different topics. The respondent shall choose a point on the scale that most accurately reflects her/his views. For example, in the question of the economic block, 1 is assigned to the statement “Competition is good”, and 10 is assigned to the statement “Competition is harmful”. Staunch supporters of the first statement are those who choose 1 or 2 on the scale, and rather supporters are those who mark 3 or 4. The same applies to the other end of the scale. People choosing 5 or 6 on the scale are hesitant or vote for both. For a more representative analysis, we have used answers that cover 4 points on the scale at once: 4 points cover staunch supporters and rather supporters on the one end of the scale, and another 4 points cover opponents on another end of the scale.

The analysis was based on the questions from the economic block, which were also used to calculate the GIEM index, namely:

- the attitude of the population to private and state property (1 — Private ownership of business and industry should be increased; 10 — Government ownership of business and industry should be increased);
- attitude towards competition (1 — Competition is good; 10 — Competition is harmful);
- individual and state responsibility for the (financial) provision for people (1 — Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for; 10 — People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves).

In addition to the economic values, the paper examines 2 issues related to the perception and understanding of democracy (also used in the GIEM index). A 10-point scale has also been used for each characteristic, where 1 — the statement is not an essential characteristic of democracy, 10 — the statement is an essential characteristic of democracy:

- “The state makes people’s incomes equal”;
- “Governments tax the rich and subsidize the poor”.

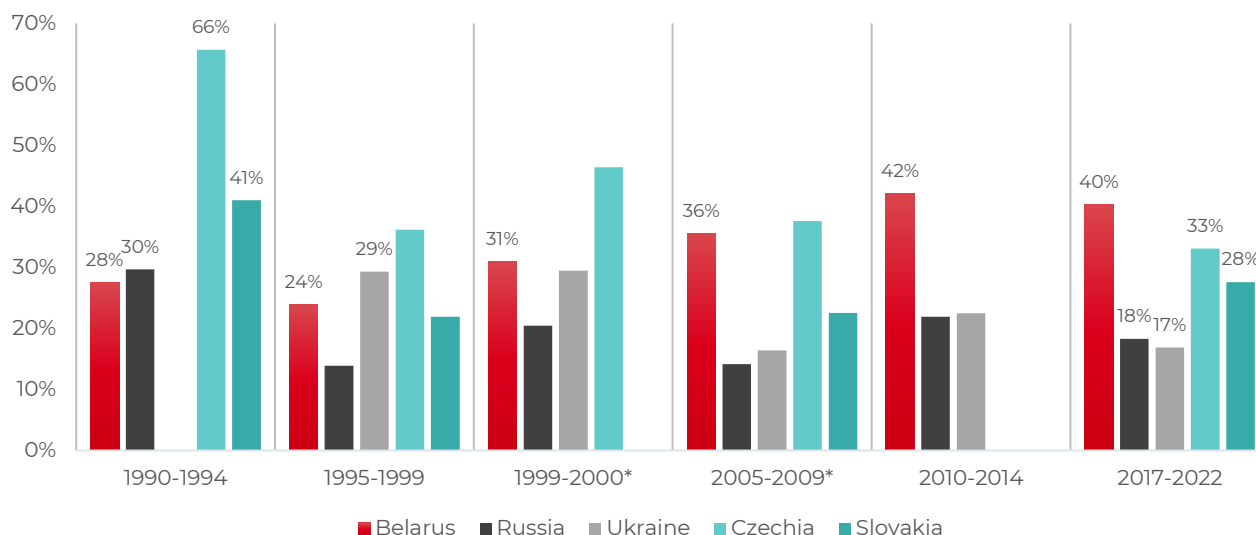
3. Economic values of Belarusians

3.1 Attitudes of the population towards private and state-owned property

One of the questions in the economic block is the attitude of the population towards private and state-owned property. According to the 1996 survey, 24% of the Belarusian population believed that the share of private property in business and industry should be increased, and **in 2018, 40% of the population supported expanding private property** (Figure 5). Despite the unfavorable and changeable position of the authorities regarding business and entrepreneurship, the demand for an expanding share of private property has been growing significantly. As a result, Belarus has the highest value of this indicator among the countries compared (Russia, Ukraine, Czechia, Slovakia, Sweden), and among European countries, Belarus ranks 6th in support of expanding private property.

By age, people aged 16 to 54 are more likely to support expanding private ownership than state ownership. The population aged 55+ is distributed proportionally: a third believe that the share of private ownership in business should expand, and a third of respondents support expanding the share of state ownership.

Figure 5. Most likely, private ownership of business and industry should be increased¹

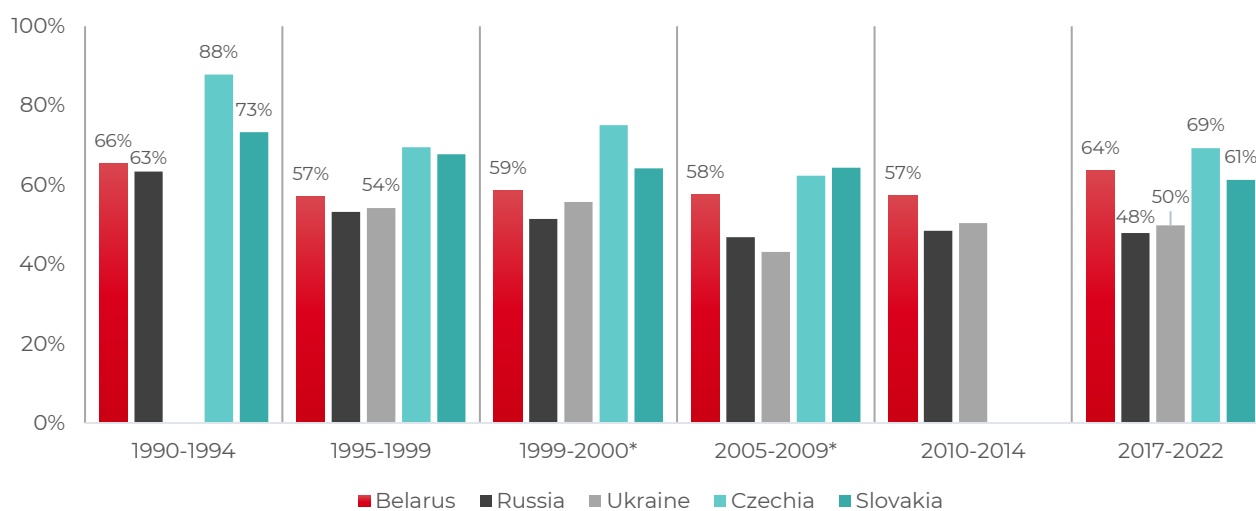


Source: authors' development based on [7, 8, 9].

3.2 Attitudes towards competition

The attitude of Belarusians to competition has not changed significantly over the past 20 years: the **majority of the population still believes that competition is a good thing (64% in 2018, see Figure 6)**. A similar attitude can be observed in Czechia and Slovakia, with a smaller percentage of support for competition in Russia and Ukraine.

Figure 6. Competition is most likely a good thing

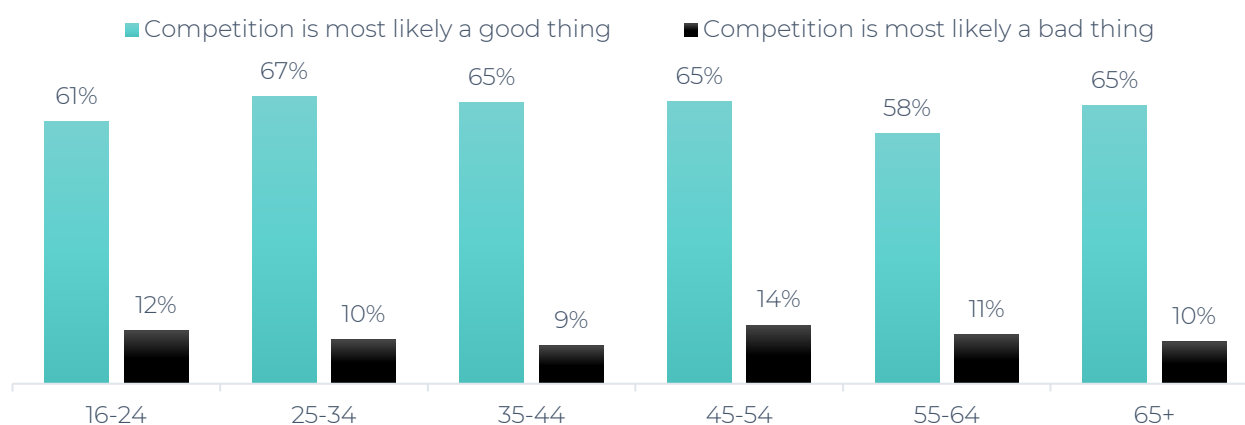


Source: authors' development based on [7, 8, 9].

¹ Hereinafter, the survey waves of 1990-1994, 1995-1999, 2010-2014 were based on the World Values Survey; the survey waves of 1999-2000, 2005-2009 were based on the European Values Survey; and the last survey wave of 2017-2022 was a joint product of WVS&EVS.

The age discrepancy is noteworthy in the competition question: the majority of Belarusians in all age strata believe that competition is good (Figure 7). Among the countries under consideration, a similar situation is observed only in Sweden. The older generation's attitude towards competition was unexpected: the share of Belarusians aged 65+ who believed that competition was good was 65%, which was comparable to the attitude of younger groups. In contrast to other analyzed questions, there is maximum solidarity among generations in Belarus about competition. As a comparison, in Russia, only 37% of people aged 65+ years have a positive attitude towards competition. In Ukraine, the share of people who believe that competition is bad is 2 times higher than in Belarus in all age groups.

Figure 7. Attitudes towards competition in Belarus, by age, 2018



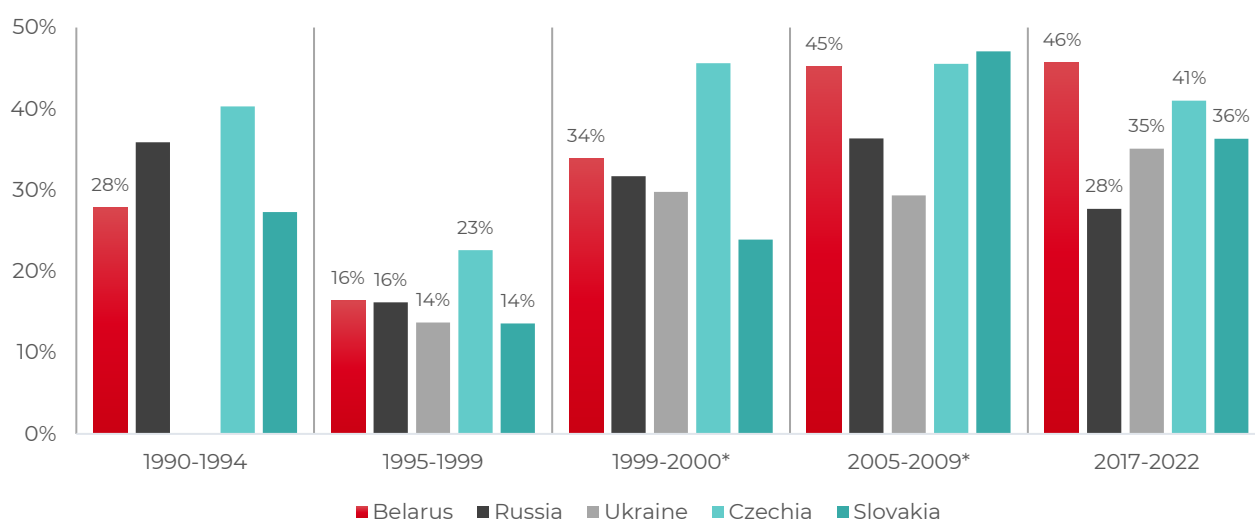
Source: authors' development based on [7, 8, 9].

3.2 Individual and state responsibility for the provision for people

The post-Soviet countries turned out to be similar as far as this question was concerned: according to the 1995-1999 survey, more than half of the population of the countries under consideration believed that the government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. The situation changed gradually: e.g., in the last wave of the survey, about 40% of the population in Russia, Ukraine, and Slovakia, as well as a third of respondents in Belarus and Czechia, shifted responsibility to the state. There was a breakthrough in Belarus in the adoption of the value “if you don't take care of yourself, no one will take care of you”: **46%** of respondents noted that they **should take more responsibility to provide for themselves**, which was 30 percentage points more than in 1996 (Figure 8).

The majority of Belarusians and Ukrainians in all age groups believe that they should be responsible for providing for themselves (except the youngest respondents: in Belarus, 52% of people aged 16-24 are ready to take this responsibility versus 36% in Ukraine). In Russia, 28% of respondents are ready to take responsibility, and if people aged 65+ are not taken into account, this share of respondents rises to 35%. Moreover, the most significant difference in answers is observed in people aged 65+: in Belarus, 48% of respondents believe that people should take responsibility; in Ukraine — 43%, in Russia — 23%.

Figure 8. Most likely, people (rather than the state) should take more responsibility to provide for themselves



Source: authors' development based on [7, 8, 9].

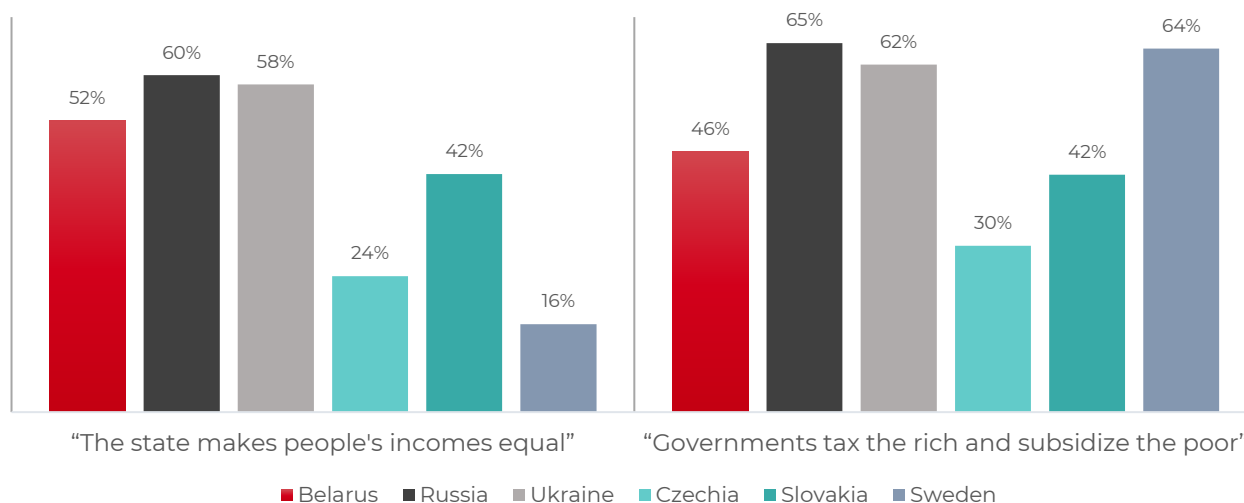
4. Belarusians' perception of democracy

To illustrate the transition from the “state mentality” to the “free market mentality”, not only economic issues but also questions from the democratic values block have been used to generate the GIEM index. Respondents were asked whether several statements (Figure 9) corresponded to their perceptions of democracy. It turned out that about half of the population of Belarus believes that in a democratic system, **“The state makes people’s incomes equal”** and **“Governments tax the rich and subsidize the poor.”** Such results generally do not indicate the “capitalist point of view” in Belarusians, and they downgrade in the GIEM rating.

It is worth noting that the majority of respondents from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine believe that the state ensures income equality in a democracy. The situation in Sweden is quite the opposite. At the same

time, majorities of the populations in Russia (65%), Ukraine (62%), and Sweden (64%) believe on average that the state taxes the rich and subsidizes the poor in a democracy. In Belarus, this share is 46%.

Figure 9. The statement is most likely an essential characteristic of democracy, 2017-2022



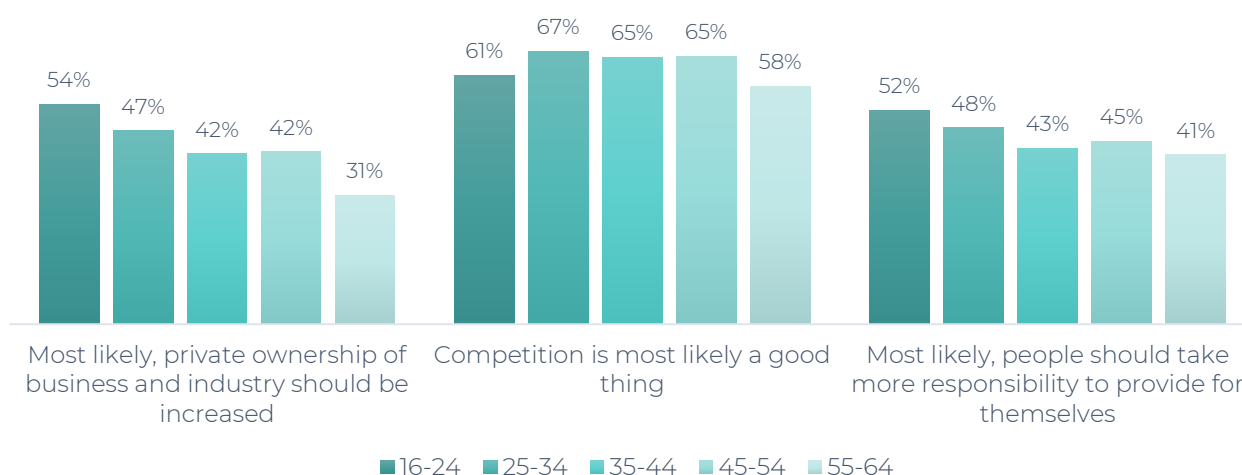
Source: authors' development based on [7, 8, 9].

Conclusion

A detailed review of the dynamics and decomposition of values orientation allows us to conclude that the unifying factors for Belarusians in 2020 were, first of all, common economic values (and not political or Self-Expression Values), which united most of the age groups of Belarusian society. The easiest way to trace the transformation of the economic values of Belarusians is to look at the following key points:

- increasing support for expanding the share of private property (+16 p.p. since 1996, 40% in 2018);
- increasing positive attitudes towards competition (+7 p.p. since 1996, 64% in 2018);
- increasing support for individual responsibility over state responsibility for providing people (+30 p.p. since 1996, 46% in 2018);
- no significant disproportion in the answers by various generations (Figure 10, except for the attitude towards private property of people aged 16-24 and 55-64 years).

Figure 10. Economic values, by age

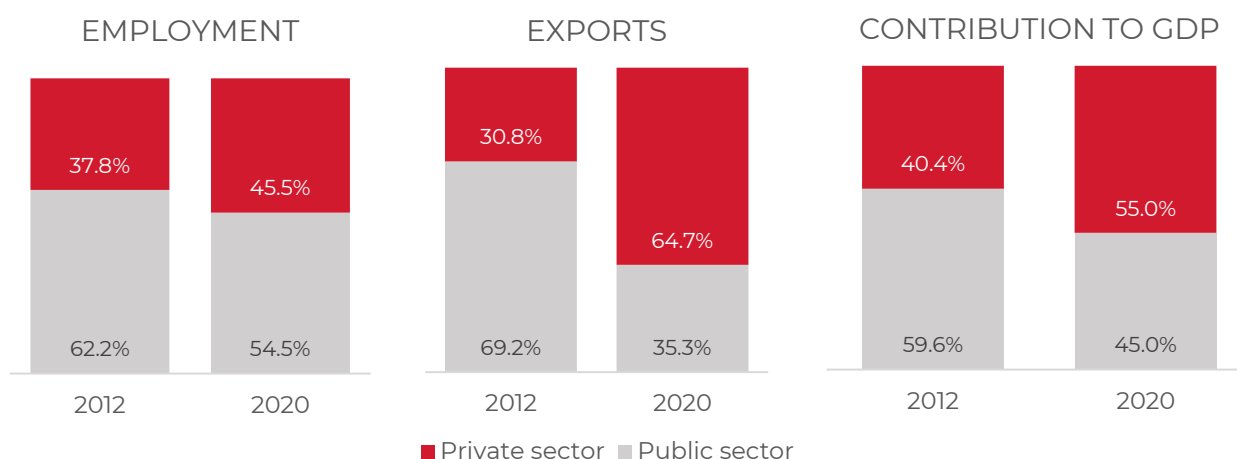


Source: authors' development based on [7, 8, 9].

The process of transformation of economic values is reflected in the development of the private sector and entrepreneurship in Belarus. In the absence of significant support measures, but in the context of systematic liberalization of the business environment (ended in 2020), the new private sector has become the most dynamic part of the Belarusian economy, and the myth of the dominant role of the public sector has been destroyed [10, 11].

The growing demand of the Belarusian society to expand the share of private property, the willingness to take responsibility for providing for themselves, and a positive attitude towards competition are directly related to the increasing contribution of the private sector to the key economic indicators. In 2020, 45.5% of Belarusians were employed in the private sector, which was associated with higher wages and greater opportunities for self-realization. Intense dynamics are also observed in the share of exports of goods and services: an increase of 33.9 percentage points compared to 2012. As a result, from 2012 to 2020, the contribution of the private sector to GDP increased by 14.6 percentage points and amounted to 55% (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Contribution of the private sector to economic performance



Source: BEROOC, 2023 [10, 11, 12].

The evolution of economic values and the similarity of generations of Belarusians in terms of economic values cannot fully explain the phenomenon of such a long and large-scale protest in 2020. In this context, the **level of trust** in society is also a significant factor. In turn, a high level of trust is closely related to economic development [14, 15]. Despite the location of Belarus on the map in the field of Survival Values, which means a low level of trust, according to this parameter in the last wave of the World Values Survey, Belarus is ahead of all neighboring countries (**40%** of the population believes that most people can be trusted), and Belarus takes the 12th position in Europe and the 17th in the world [7].

Along with the dynamics of the economic values, the level of trust is a significant pillar for future reforms and joint efforts, the success of which will depend on the relevance of initiatives to the values and beliefs of Belarusian society.

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