CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS

PERCEPTIONS OF THE BELARUSIAN REGIME:

AGGRESSOR OR PROTECTOR?

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SUMMARY

- The Belarusian regime is now perceived as a consolidated autocracy — both internationally and by many of its own citizens. But how do Belarusians themselves view their regime: as a protector and peacekeeper, or as an aggressor and oppressor? And how has its image evolved? To explore these questions, we conducted an online survey of 512 respondents, supplementing it with data from other studies. Our findings were interpreted through the lens of collective trauma research.

- Our research shows that over the past five years, perceptions of the Belarusian regime have changed considerably, due to several factors: first, the initial wave of COVID-19 exposed long-standing tensions between the authorities and society; the pandemic seriously damaged the regime's image as an effective protector, which it had been cultivating for decades. Next, following the mass repressions that accompanied the 2020 protests, two contrasting images of the regime emerged: on the one hand, that of an 'oppressor' suffocating civic initiative; on the other, that of a 'protector' ensuring stability and order. Finally, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Belarusian regime increasingly came to be portrayed as a co-aggressor internationally, while domestically its image as a peacekeeper took firmer hold. More recently, demand for security has begun to decline among Belarusians, while demand for economic fairness and political liberalisation has grown.

- According to our survey, a relative majority of Belarusians (42%) now view the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms as a key responsibility of the state. This reflects public fatigue with repression and a growing desire for greater autonomy. At the same time, a portion of the population — notably women and young people — continue to see the authorities as an effective guardian ensuring social stability. This divergence in perception pointsto the ambivalent image of the Belarusian regime, which combines expectations of care from the state (the regime) with an aspiration to emancipate from it.

- At the same time, half of respondents (50%) believe that the modern Belarusian state serves either the interests of the ruling elite or 'who knows whom,' which may indicate a crisis of legitimacy. In addition, two-thirds of those surveyed were unable to name any successes or failures the country has experienced in recent years. This may point to a collective strategy of silence — a pattern typical of societies lacking the space or means to process traumatic experience.

- As it becomes less evident that the regime is capable of fulfilling its core state functions, its image as a 'protector and peacekeeper' has begun to fade. The results of our survey point to a growing perception of the Belarusian regime as an 'aggressor and oppressor'. This undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of society.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the collapse of the USSR, economic turmoil, and social instability, the first half of the 1990s was a period of profound collective trauma in Belarus (as in the post-Soviet region in general)[1].The ensuing fear of uncertainty naturally fostered a willingness among people to sacrifice freedom in exchange for security and stability[2].

Capitalising on this public demand, Alyaksandr Lukashenka offered society an unequal and inherently traumatic compromise: in exchange for the return of familiar Soviet-era norms and a sense of stability, Belarusians were assigned a subordinate role — that of the 'victims of the 1990s'[3].The regime, in turn, adopted the role of an active, even aggressive, 'guardian', protecting society from the threats of external and internal chaos. This balance of roles — the aggressive guardian and the passive victim — allowed the regime, for a time, to secure its legitimacy[4] by institutionalising the nation's collective traumatic experience[5].

Eventually, however, the foundational purposes of these roles began to erode, and the regime's image as an effective protector came under increasing scrutiny. The trauma of the Soviet collapse was losing its relevance[6], even if the authorities continued to invoke it as part of their strategy of retraumatising society[7]. Meanwhile, the state's ability to sustain people's sense of stability and security gradually weakened. This was felt most acutely in the economy: recurrent tensions in relations with Russia reduced the resources available to maintain previous levels of social spending.

In the end, the authorities were forced to grant society greater freedom in everyday life — and above all in the economic sphere. People gained the ability to solve their immediate problems

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1 Sztompka, P. (2005). The trauma of social change: A case of post-communist societies. In Cultural trauma and collective identity. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (pp. 155–195).

2 a) Przeworski, A. (1991). Democracy and the market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;
b) Nussbaum, M. C. (2018). The monarchy of fear: A philosopher looks at our political crisis. Simon & Schuster.

3 Zhukova, K. (2016). Trauma management: Chernobyl in Belarus and Ukraine. British Journal of Sociology, 67(4), 711-730.

4 a) Boym, S. (2001). The future of nostalgia. Basic Books;
b) Rouda, U. (2012). Belarus: Transformation from authoritarianism towards sultanism. Baltic Journal of Political Science, 1(1), 75–92.

5 Incidentally, the Chernobyl disaster was interpreted in Belarus through the same 'pro-state' logic. In Ukraine, the collective processing of the Chernobyl trauma took the form of a retrospective narrative that openly criticised and blamed the Soviet authorities. This helped shape a new national identity defined in opposition to the past. In Belarus, by contrast, a narrative was constructed in which criticism of the Soviet state responsible for the accident was minimised. Instead, the state was portrayed as a 'protector' shielding citizens from the consequences of the catastrophe. (см. Zhukova, K. (2016). Trauma management: Chernobyl in Belarus and Ukraine. British Journal of Sociology, 67(4), 711-730).

6 Research shows that the share of Belarusians who wanted to see the USSR restored has declined steadily: in 1993, it was more than half, but just twenty years later, by 2013, it had fallen to less than a quarter (see Appendix).

7 This strategy was implemented through the constant invocation of the banditry and poverty of the 1990s as symbols of danger from which Belarusians were supposedly rescued by the state, embodied in Alyaksandr Lukashenka

independently, though without the right to represent their interests politically. As a result, the distance between state and society began to grow:[8] the old model of relations, in which the regime played the role of an overbearing protector and society that of a passive victim, started to break down. Nevertheless, the authorities continued by inertia to perform the role of authoritarian protector, while society gradually moved out of its subordinate position. This was how the image of the Belarusian regime was evolving up until 2020; the events that followed profoundly shaped its further development.

Existing political science research describes the Belarusian regime as a 'paternalist state'[9],a form of 'preemptive authoritarianism'[10], 'sultanism'[11],or a 'hegemonic authoritarian regime'.[12] Yet these studies say little about how Belarusian society itself perceives Alyaksandr Lukashenka's governance. How do Belarusians view the 'image' and legitimacy of the current regime? To them, is Lukashenka's rule a hostile dictatorship or an efficient protector?

These questions tend to fall outside the scope of empirical research, which more often records only the general attitudes of the population towards Lukashenka's regime.

To address this gap, our study set out to answer three research questions:

1. What problems do Belarusians see in the country's development, and how have perceived problems changed over time
2. How do Belarusians define the key functions and responsibilities of the current authorities: ensuring economic growth, maintaining social justice, or avoiding participation in the war against Ukraine?
3. How do Belarusians assess the government's successes and failures in carrying out these functions and responsibilities? What do they see as the most significant achievements and failures since 2020 and across the entire period of Lukashenka's rule?

To understand how the situation has evolved in recent years, we compared data from our online survey of urban Belarusians with the findings of other sociological studies. As an interpretive framework, we drew on the analytical tradition of collective trauma studies.

The study is structured in several parts. First, we outline the main concepts and methodological principles underpinning the research. We then present the results of our analysis of the online survey and other sociological data, focusing on how respondents framed the regime's goals, failures, and achievements. The conclusion summarises our key findings and interprets them through the analytical lens of collective trauma studies.

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[8] Vodolazhskaya, T., Shelest, O., Yegorov, A., Artyomenko, E. Потенциал солидарности в беларусском обществе (отчет по исследованию). [The Potential for Solidarity in Belarusian Society (Research Report)], 2015, Ts.E.T. and BISS.

[9] Социальные контракты в современной Беларуси [Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus], ed. by K. Haiduk, Ye. Rakova and V. Silitski. – St Petersburg: Nevsky Prostor, 2009. — 224 pp.

[10] Silitski, V. (2005). Preempting democracy: The case of Belarus. Journal of Democracy, 16(4), 83–97.

[11] Chehabi, H. E., & Linz, J. J. (Eds.). (1998). Sultanistic regimes. The Johns Hopkins University Press; Rouda, U. (2012). Belarus: Transformation from authoritarianism towards sultanism. Baltic Journal of Political Science, 1(1), 75–92.

[12] Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge University Press.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical basis of the study consists of data from several surveys, the main one being an online poll conducted via an online panel between 26 and 30 May 2025[13]. The sample represents the adult urban population of Belarus with internet access. The achieved sample size was 512 respondents, with a maximum margin of error of ±4.3%.

The sample has the following characteristics:

DISTRIBUTION	CHARACTERISTIC	PERCENT (%)[14]
Gender	Male	48
	Female	52
Age	18–24	6
	25–34	19
	35–44	27
	45–54	23
	55+	26
Education	Secondary	12
	Vocational or technical secondary	31
	Higher (including incomplete)	57

[13] The survey was conducted in such a way as to prioritise respondents' safety. All responses were anonymised, the data were securely stored, and participants were informed that their answers would be used only in aggregated form. They were also free to skip any question or withdraw from the survey at any time.

[14] Here and elsewhere, column percentages may exceed 100 due to rounding.

Data from the following studies was also used in our analysis:

- Monitoring by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies[15] (face-to-face surveys representing the entire adult population of Belarus);

- Monitoring by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus[16] (face-to-face surveys representing the entire adult population of Belarus; for this report, the data were recalculated to represent only the adult urban population);

- Research by the Chatham House Belarus Initiative[17] (online surveys representing the internet-using urban population).

The theoretical basis of this study lies in research on collective trauma, an approach used to examine public perceptions of political regimes, as well as the mechanisms through which those regimes legitimise themselves[18].

The central idea behind collective trauma research is that a large-scale traumatic experience does not automatically produce collective trauma. Collective trauma emerges only after such experience is consciously interpreted and codified: the 'traumatic event' is identified, the bearer of the trauma ('the victim') is defined, and sometimes its source ('the aggressor') is specified.

Political regimes can exploit interpretations of traumatic events to their advantage, turning them into narratives that justify their power and actions (this process is known as the *'instrumentalisation of trauma*[19]). By selecting and sacralising certain traumas, by constructing a narrative of a 'chosen trauma'[20], the authorities delineate the boundaries of 'us' and 'them', shape collective memory, and reinforce the symbolic unity of society.

We also draw on the concept of the *'trauma manager'*. This concept refers to an actor who recontextualises collective traumatic experience in light of current circumstances. Such an actor determines which trauma becomes dominant, which experiences may be discussed or silenced, and which groups assume the roles of 'victim' and 'aggressor'.

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[15] Динамика беларусского общественного мнения по некоторым социально-экономическим и политическим проблемам [Trends in Belarusian public opinion on selected socio-economic and political issues] (based on nationwide surveys by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, %) Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 2015.

[16] Archive of Henadz Korshunau, former Director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

[17] Official website of the initiative — https://belaruspolls.org/

[18] See, for instance: A.B. Lerner (2019). Theorizing Collective Trauma in International Political Economy. International Studies Review, 21(4), 549-571 or Hellmann, O. (2021). The dictator's screenplay: Collective memory narratives and the legitimacy of communist rule in East Asia. Democratization, 28(4), 659–683.

[19] Assmann, A., & Shortt, L. (Eds.) (2012). Memory and Political Change. Palgrave Macmillan.

[20] Volkan, V. D. (2001). Transgenerational transmissions and chosen traumas: An aspect of large-group identity. Group Analysis, 34(1), 79-97.

SHIFTING PERCEPTION OF THE BELARUSIAN REGIME: PROBLEMS, RESPONSIBILITIES, SUCCESSES, AND FAILURES

The chain of events that began in 2020 fundamentally altered the relationship between the Belarusian regime and society, as well as the way Belarusians perceived their government.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed a deep divide between the regime and ordinary citizens, shattering the uneasy compromise imposed after the collapse of the Soviet system. The authorities effectively withdrew from efforts to fight the pandemic, abandoning their role as society's protector. Society, meanwhile, rejected the role of victim — recognising its own strength and taking a proactive stance in confronting the crisis[21].

The next step society took was to attempt to redefine the old 'victim versus aggressor' relationship. The mass protests that followed the rigged presidential election became the culmination of this process — but they were brutally suppressed. The part of society that supported the protests underwent a profoundly traumatic experience. Research shows that nearly all of its participants suffered personal, physical, or emotional trauma[22]. Yet for many of them, this experience did not merely deepen the trauma but marked the emergence of a collective hero-subject[23], albeit, due to the lack of victory, a tragic one.

The protests also had a profound impact on the Belarusian regime, dislodging it from its role as a 'trauma manager'. The authorities were forced into the position of the 'oppressor', or the 'traumatic aggressor'[24]. This shift was accompanied by ongoing repression.

In an effort to restore the pre-protest status quo, the authorities have resorted not only to large-scale repression but also to manipulating collective memory. To that end, the regime introduced the notion of the 'genocide of the Belarusian people' during the Second World War. Through this narrative, it seeks to redefine Belarus's 'true'[25] collective trauma, symbolically replacing the events of 2020 with it and reasserting the Belarusian people's role as victims.

By that point, two interconnected yet opposing images of the regime had taken hold in the public consciousness: the 'oppressor', subjugating society by force, and the 'protector', safeguarding the country from chaos and external threats.

By 2021, the first image — the regime as oppressor, holding back society's development — had

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[21] SATIO; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. (2020, December). Влияние пандемии COVID-19 на экономические и социальные процессы в Беларуси: Итоговый отчёт. [The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic and social processes in Belarus: Final report]. Kyiv: FES Representation in Ukraine.

[22] For more, see: Korshunau, H. (2024). Collective Trauma: The Case of Belarus after 2020. TOPOS, (3), 5–36.

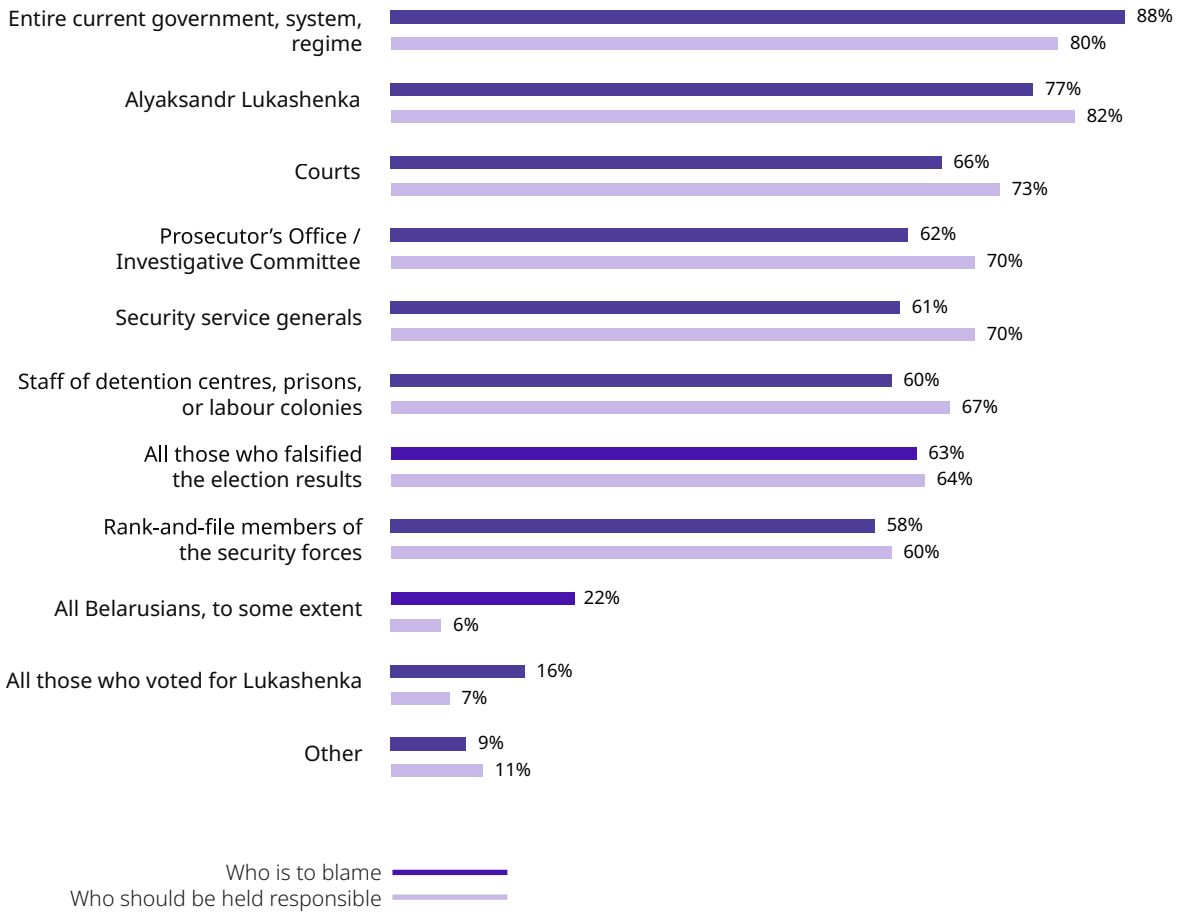
[23] Korshunau, H. (2024). Collective Trauma: The Case of Belarus after 2020. TOPOS, (3), 5–36.

[24] Hirschberger, G. (2018). Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning. Frontiers in Psychology, 9, 1441

[25] Jacoby, T. A. (2015). A Theory of Victimhood: Politics, Conflict and the Construction of Victim-Based Identity. Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 43(2), 511–530.

become dominant among roughly half of Belarusians, at least within the urban population[26], as well as amongst nearly the entire diaspora that emerged after 2020. This perception is most clearly reflected in the statements of those who experienced violence at the hands of the security forces (see table below[27]).

Views of Belarusians who experienced violence on who is to blame and who should be held responsible



Question wording: (1) 'Thinking about Belarus and what happened, and about what you personally went through, who do you think is to blame? (multiple answers possible)'; and (2) 'Who should be held responsible for this? (multiple answers possible)'

[26] Chatham House. (2021). Belarusians' views on the political crisis (Results of a public opinion poll conducted between 20 and 30 April 2021). Chatham House Belarus Initiative.

[27] Korshunau, H. (Ed.). (2024c). Perceptions of justice among survivors of torture and/or ill-treatment. Viasna Human Rights Center & International Committee to Investigate Torture in Belarus.

The image of the authoritarian 'protector', familiar to Belarusian society since the 1990s, was actively promoted by state propaganda[28]. During this period, it resonated with at least a quarter of Belarusian urban dwellers[29].

However, the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022 sharply altered perceptions of the Belarusian authorities. By allowing its territory to be used for Russia's assault on Kyiv, Minsk found itself cast as a co-aggressor — a role in which the regime is viewed by the international community, pro-democratic Belarusians,[30] and the newly formed diaspora[31].

Inside the country, however, the picture is more complex. Sociological research in Belarus recorded a strong anti-war consensus that had formed even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine[32]. At the same time, fears of an economic crisis triggered by the war and Western sanctions intensified[33]. Yet the worst predictions did not come true: Belarusian troops did not take part in combat, Russian forces withdrew from the country, and the economy avoided collapse.

As a result, the familiar 1990s image of the regime as society's guardian and protector gained newfound salience in the public consciousness. In the context of war, this image acquired an additional 'peacemaker' dimension. By early 2025, more than two-thirds of respondents agreed to some degree with the statement 'Lukashenka is doing everything possible to keep Belarus out of the war' (36% fully agreed, 32% rather agreed)[34].

The same survey included an open-ended question about Alyaksandr Lukashenka's key messages in the 2025 election campaign. The most common response was 'peace and security' (24%). At the same time, almost half of respondents (48%) were unable to name any central idea. This likely points to a lack of substantive meaning — compensated instead by an emotional appeal to 'stability and calm

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[28] See, for example, Aleshko-Lessels, O, Yeliseyeu, A. (2022). Сюжетные линии беларусских государственных телеканалов. [Subjects of Belarusian State Television]. Quarterly Monitoring: October–December 2021. iSANS.

[29] Chatham House. (2021). Взгляды беларусов на политический кризис (результаты социологического опроса, проведенного с 20 по 30 апреля 2021 года). Chatham House Belarus Initiative.

[30] National Survey (2022). Восприятие войны протестными беларусами: чувствуют ответственность и надеются на победу Украины. [Perceptions of the war amid protest-supporting Belarusians: They feel responsible and hope that Ukraine will be victories].

[31] Alampiev, O., & Bikanov, F. (2022, August). Беларусы в Польше, Литве, Грузии: отношение к войне, помощь Украине, дискриминация. Результаты социологического исследования. [Belarusians in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia: Attitudes Towards the War, Help for Ukraine, and Discrimination. Results of Sociological Research]. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

[32] Chatham House. (2022a) What Belarusians think about the upcoming referendum and a possible war (Results of a public opinion poll conducted between 20 January and 9 February 2022).

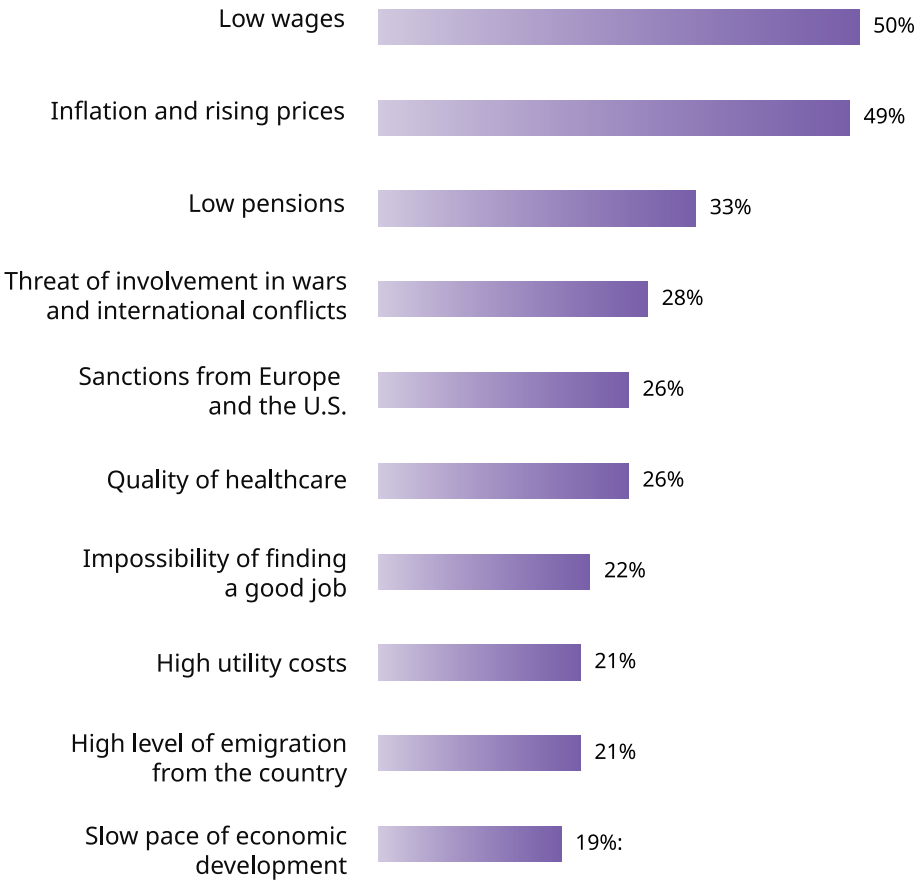
[33] Chatham House. (2022b). Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Results of a public opinion poll conducted between 5 and 14 March 2022).

[34] Chatham House. (2025). Perceptions of the electoral campaign and the situation in Belarus (Results of a public opinion study conducted between 9 December 2024 and 15 January 2025).

HOW BELARUSIANS DEFINE THE COUNTRY'S KEY PROBLEMS

After nearly four years of the Russian–Ukrainian war, Belarusians' demand for security has begun to decline. Data show that in 2025, only 28% of respondents still considered the threat of Belarus's involvement in the war a pressing concern. By comparison, in April 2022, the level of anxiety over this issue was twice as high.[35]

Top 10 most important problems facing Belarus



Distribution of responses to the question: 'Which of the following would you identify as the most important problems facing Belarus today?' Respondents could choose multiple answers.

At present, the threat of Belarus's involvement in the war ranks fourth among the country's most pressing problems. Men and those aged 45 and older are most concerned about this issue. **The top three concerns are economic: (1) low wages, (2) inflation and rising prices, and (3) low pensions.**

It is worth noting that economic issues have consistently topped the list of Belarusians' concerns. The only exception in recent years came in September 2020, when people were most preoccupied with human rights violations.

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[35] A total of 57% agreed to some extent with the statement 'I am deeply afraid that Russia will drag Belarus into this war' (Source: Chatham House. (2022c). Belarusians' views on Russia's war on Ukraine (The results of a public opinion poll conducted between 8 and 18 April 2022)). Despite the differences in methodology and question wording, the decline in the level of concern appears quite significan.

Groups of problems[36] concerning respondents from 2009 to 2025, according to data from the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (2009–2022) and the Centre for New Ideas (2025)

	2009	2019	2020			2022	2025
			FEBRUARY	JUNE	SEPTEMBER		
Inflation, prices, and utility costs	36	42	51	49	38	41	35
Wages and pensions	31	38	42	37	27	29	41
Health	46	36	47	49	34	42	-
Human rights	-	-	-	-	40	16	15
Threats to territorial integrity / war	-	-	-	-	24	18	28
Social issues	34	27	29	23	21	22	20
Everyday life	21	20	24	18	13	15	22
Drunkenness and alcoholism	24	18	25	16	12	14	-
Inequality / social polarisation	14	23	31	21	26	20	15
Other	16	16	24	19	28	22	14

The studies by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus were conducted through face-to-face surveys based on a nationwide random sample; the figures in the table have been recalculated to represent the urban population. The Centre for New Ideas study was conducted as an online survey using an internet panel representing Belarus's urban population

A distinctive feature of current economic anxiety is that, in the past, people were more concerned about inflation and rising prices — that is, about the external economic environment. Now we see the opposite: the main concern is no longer prices but the level of wages and pensions, reflecting unease about people's personal financial circumstances.

We believe this shift reflects the growing personal significance of economic problems — people are increasingly struggling to make ends meet. This is supported by monitoring data from BEROC, which show that household consumer confidence began to decline in the second quarter of 2025, falling by 3.4 percentage points[37] over the first two quarters of the year. It is the first two-quarter decline recorded since the second quarter of 2022.

[36] To compare data from studies conducted in different years, using different methodologies and problem lists, we grouped together issues with similar meanings. The figures shown in the table represent average values calculated for each group of related problems.

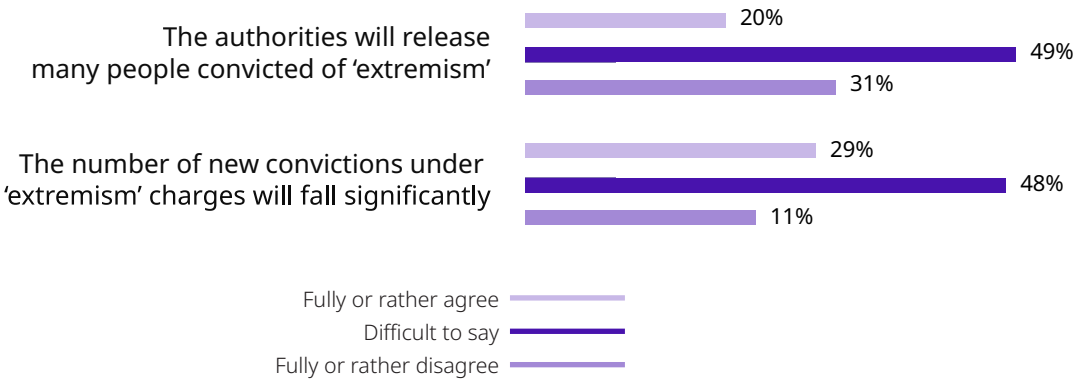
[37] BEROC (2025). Доходы и потребительская уверенность домохозяйств в июле 2025. Мониторинг экономики Беларуси, III квартал 2025 [Household income and consumer confidence in July 2025. Monitoring of the Belarusian Economy, QIII 2025].

It is reasonable to assume that the influence of the 'war factor' is indeed waning. Public attitudes toward the relationship between the regime and society appear to be reverting to the pre-pandemic aspiration for personal independence and social emancipation — a sentiment that had been maturing over the past several decades[38].

All this has created a situation in which the regime's ability to act as protector and guarantor of economic stability is increasingly being called into question. As a result, there is a growing demand for political change — for competitive elections, liberalisation, and a reduction in state control. People also hope to see a loosening of repressive pressure on society, with only 10–14% opposing the end of repression[39].

Dissatisfaction with the economic situation and the growing demand for political change indicate that the image of the regime as a peacemaker (both an aggressor and society's protector), which had strengthened immediately after the war began, has started to fade. People want the authorities to move away from policies of oppression. Nonetheless, in early 2025, fewer than 30% of respondents expected the regime to grant amnesty to political prisoners or to ease prosecutions under so-called 'extremism' articles.

Share of respondents who agree with statements about the possibility of easing repressive policies in Belarus at the start of 2025



Distribution of responses to the question: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the situation in the country in the year following the 2025 presidential election? Please answer based on whether you expect or do not expect these events and developments to occur.'

Despite the broader trends of recent years and decades, a segment of Belarusian society does not seek independence or emancipation from the state — for them, stability and social protection provided by the regime remain crucial. For these people, the dominant element in the regime's image is not that of an oppressor, but of a protector.

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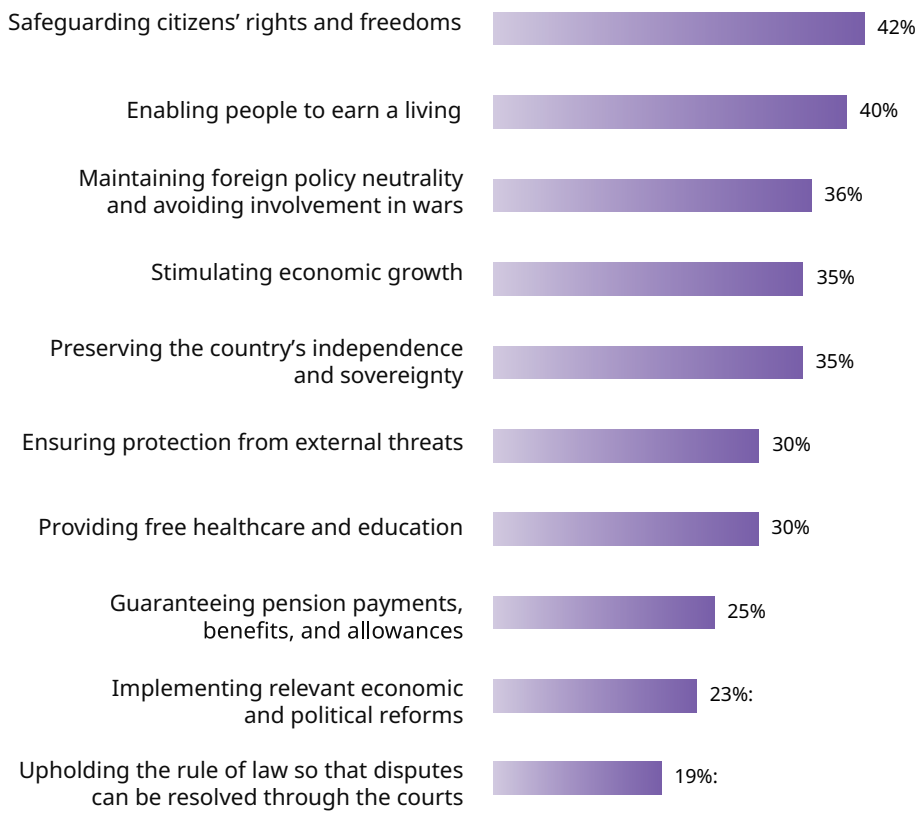
[38] See, for example, Krawatzek, F., & Langbein, J. (2022). Attitudes towards democracy and the market in Belarus: What has changed and why it matters. Post-Soviet Affairs, 38(1–2), 107–124.

[39] Chatham House. (2025). Perceptions of the electoral campaign and the situation in Belarus (Results of a public opinion study conducted between 9 December 2024 and 15 January 2025)

HOW BELARUSIANS DEFINE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE STATE

According to our survey, respondents see the state's main responsibility today as **ensuring citizens' rights and freedoms** — a view shared by 42% of participants. The high importance attached to this issue aligns logically with the perception of the Belarusian regime as excessively repressive, as described above.

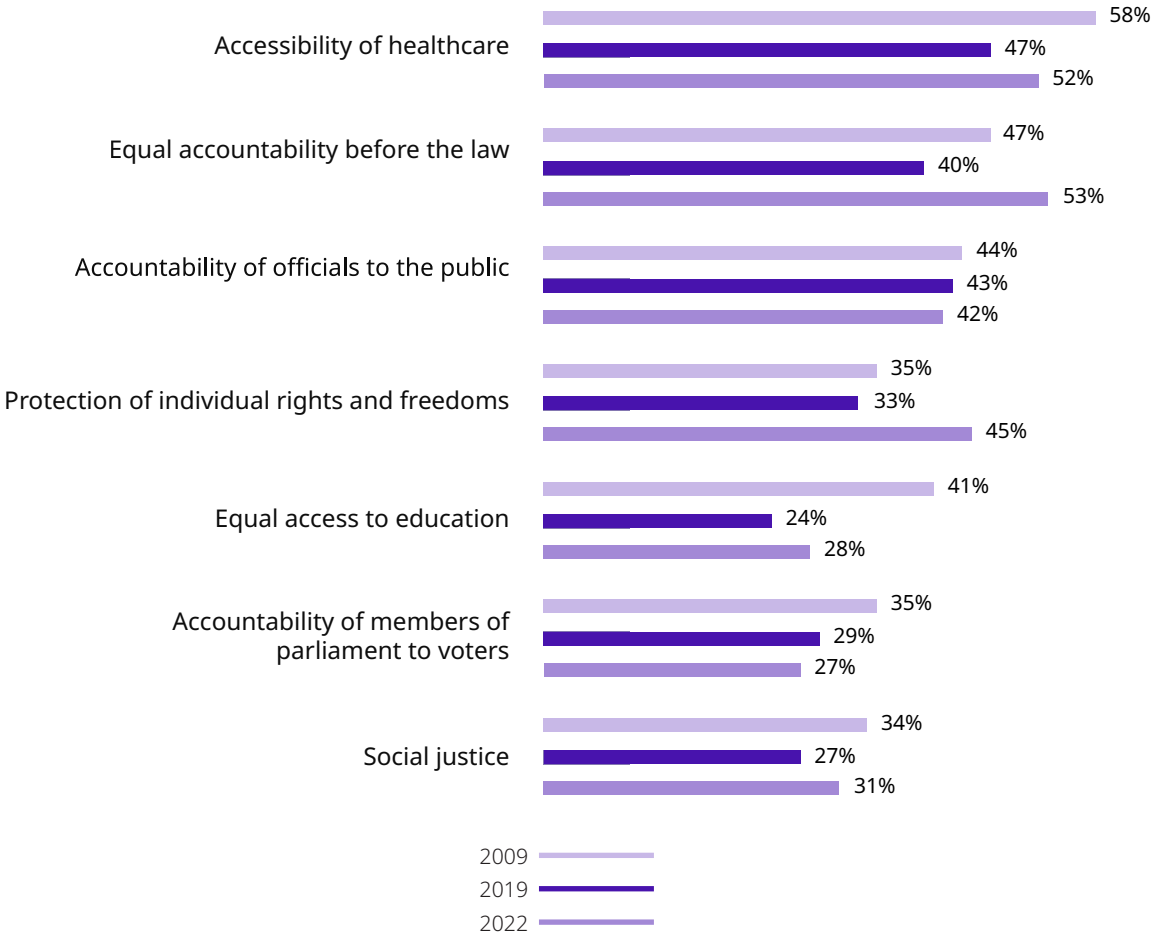
Distribution of responses to the question: 'In your view, what should the country's highest authorities prioritise?'



Based on responses to the question: 'In your view, what should the country's highest authorities prioritise?'

Moreover, even data from state sociologists at the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus show that the issue of human rights has deeply concerned Belarusians since 2020.

Seven main areas of state responsibility (according to data from the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus)



Based on grouped responses to the question: 'Which of the following social goals do you consider essential for the state to achieve?'

Over time, the importance of protecting individual rights and freedoms has remained almost unchanged. This is hardly surprising, as nearly half of respondents in a Chatham House Belarus Initiative survey believe that ordinary people today are not protected from arbitrary abuse of power[41].

Today, the responsibility of safeguarding citizens' rights and freedoms is seen as particularly important by men, people aged 45 and over, and residents of Minsk and the Hrodna region. Among younger respondents, however, this priority is far less prominent: while around 45% of those aged 45 and above name it first among the state's responsibilities, only 26% of young people aged 18–24 do so — placing it sixth in their hierarchy of priorities.

The second most frequently cited responsibility of the state is **providing people with opportunities to earn a living.** This priority is most often mentioned by those aged 35–44 and by residents of the Mahiliou, Minsk, and Homiel regions.

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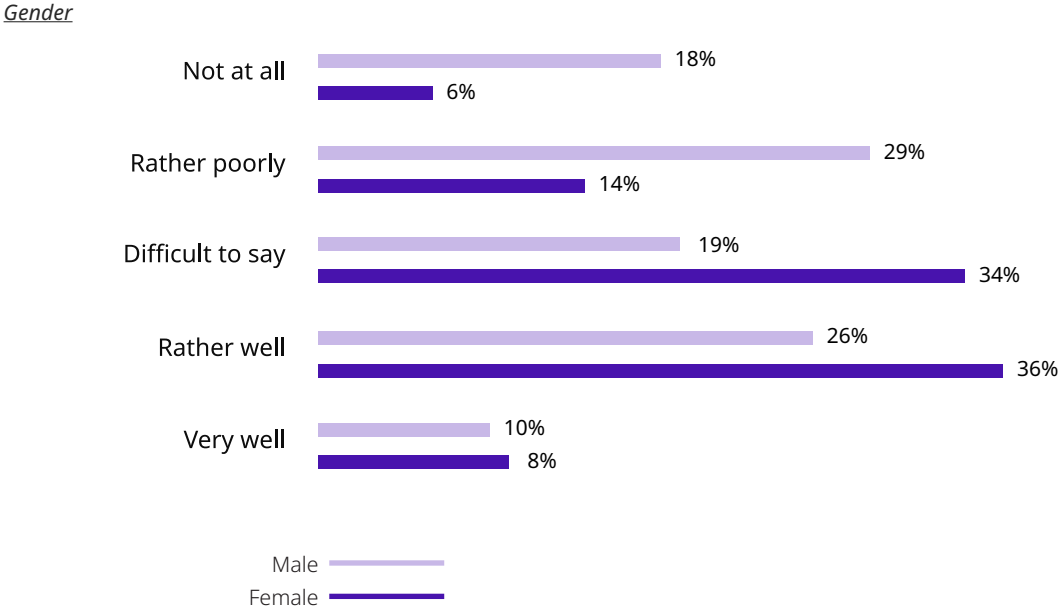
[40] Chatham House. (2025). Perceptions of the electoral campaign and the situation in Belarus (Results of a public opinion study conducted between 9 December 2024 and 15 January 2025).

In third place come three closely linked responsibilities that Belarusians expect the authorities to fulfil: **maintaining neutrality and avoiding involvement in war, stimulating economic growth, and safeguarding the country's independence and sovereignty.** The desire to stay out of war is most often voiced by those aged 45 and older; concern for economic growth is strongest among residents of Minsk and the Mahiliou region; and preserving Belarus's independence is most important to older respondents and Minsk residents.

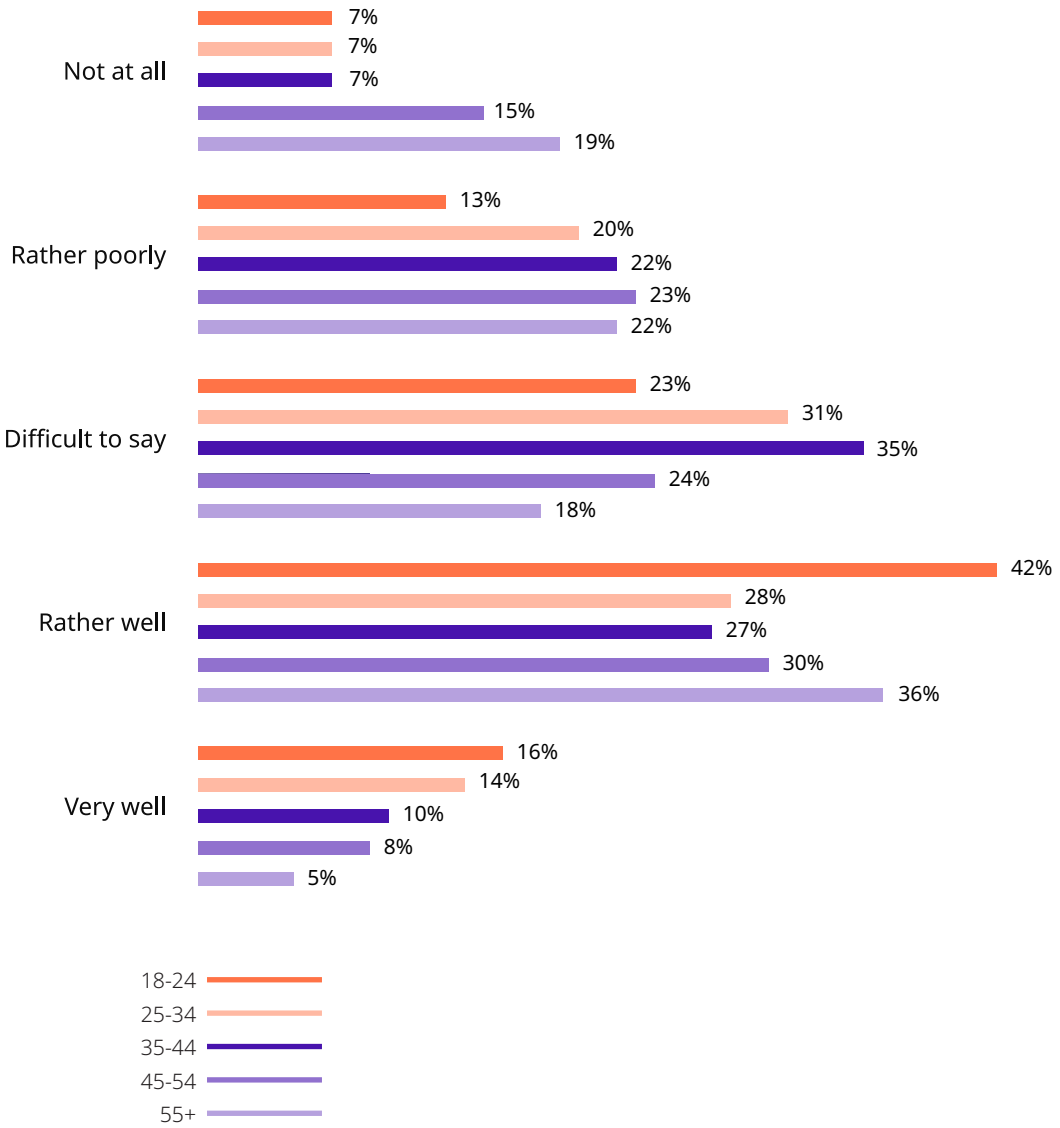
The responsibilities that respondents consider key for the Belarusian authorities are complex and demand resources that exceed the regime's real capacity. Nevertheless, respondents generally believe that the government is coping rather than failing: 40% think the authorities are fulfilling their responsibilities to some extent, 34% believe they are not, and 26% found it difficult to give an assessment.

Distribution of responses to the question: 'How well do you think the country's leadership is fulfilling the responsibilities you identified as the most important?'



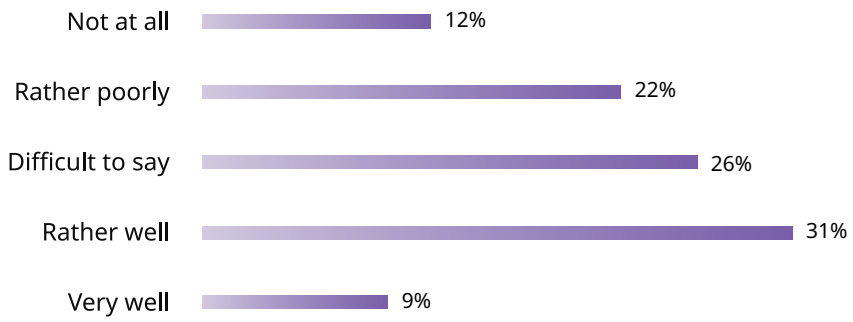
Distribution of responses to the question: 'How well do you think the country's leadership is fulfilling the responsibilities you identified as the most important?'

Age



Distribution of responses to the question: ‘How well do you think the country’s leadership is fulfilling the responsibilities you identified as the most important?’

Total



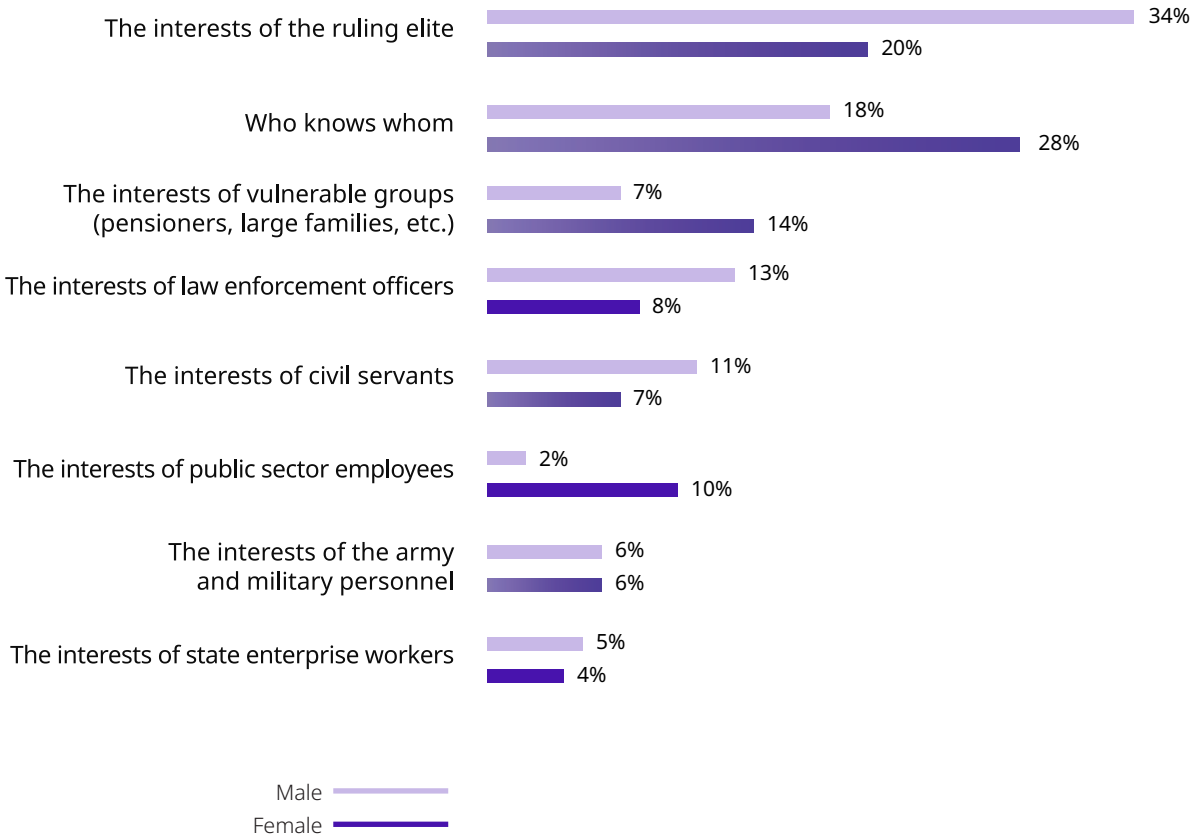
Levels of satisfaction with the authorities’ performance vary markedly across social groups. Among women, 46% believe the government fulfils or largely fulfils its responsibilities, compared to just 35% of men.

Age also makes a difference: 39% of respondents aged 35 and over are satisfied, on average, while among young people (aged 18–24) the figure rises to 58%. Geographically, dissatisfaction with the authorities’ performance is reported most often in Minsk, as well as in the Minsk and Mahiliou regions.

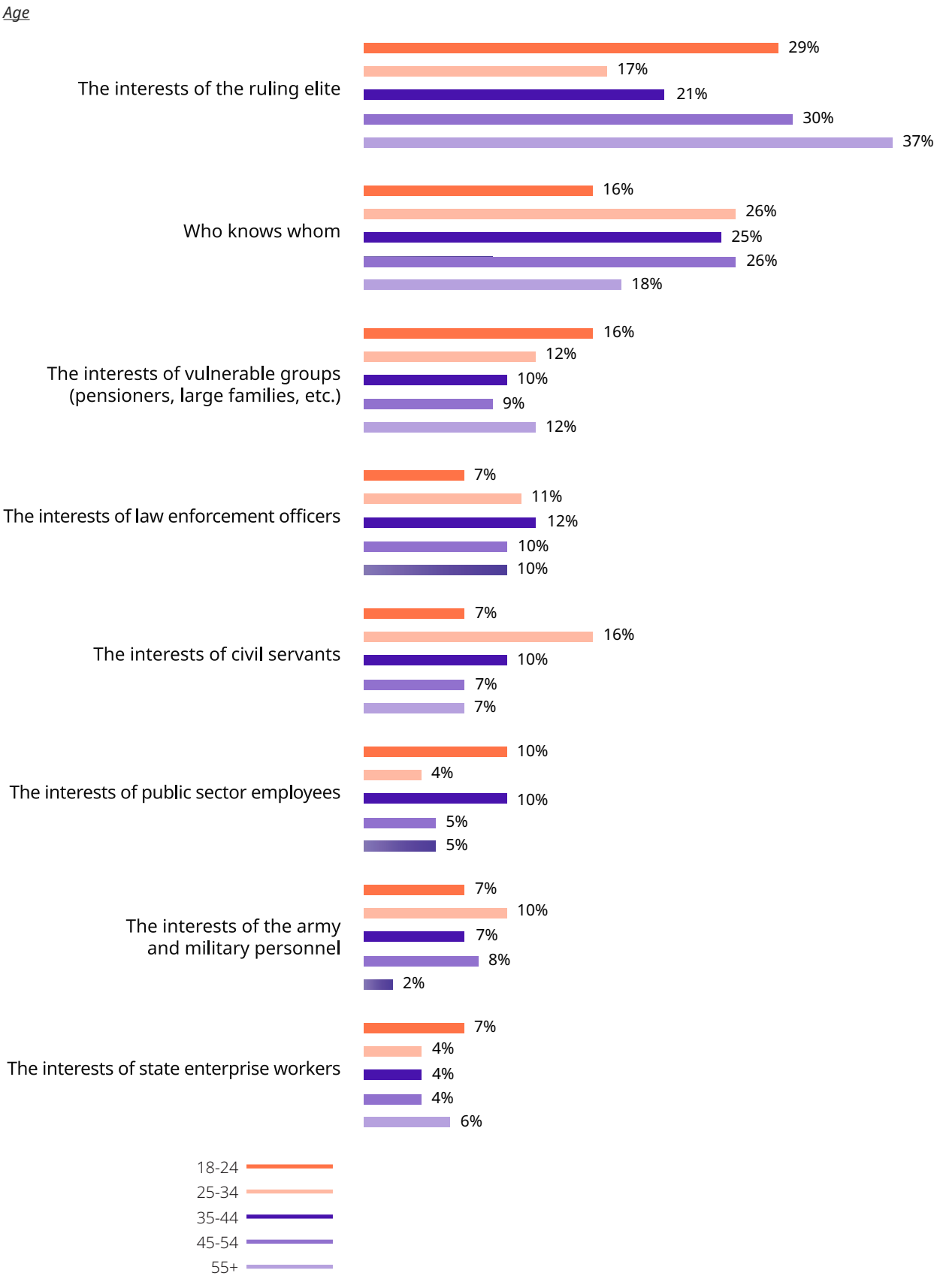
There is no consensus in Belarus regarding how effectively the authorities are doing their job. This makes it especially interesting to examine whose interests people believe the state represents. The most common answer is ‘the interests of the ruling elite’, chosen by 27% of respondents. The second most frequent response, selected by 23%, was ‘difficult to say’.

Distribution of responses to the question: 'Whose interests do you think our state primarily protects at present?'

Gender



Distribution of responses to the question: 'Whose interests do you think our state primarily protects at present?'



Distribution of responses to the question: ‘Whose interests do you think our state primarily protects at present?’

Note: the table shows only those options selected by more than 5% of respondents.

Thus, half of respondents believe that the modern Belarusian state protects either the interests of the ruling elite or those of ‘who knows whom’. Most of those who hold these views are men and people aged 45 and older.

The third most common response was that ‘the state protects the interests of vulnerable groups (pensioners, large families, etc.)’. The relatively high level of support for this view is largely due to the preponderance of this opinion among women and, perhaps unexpectedly, young people (aged 18–24).

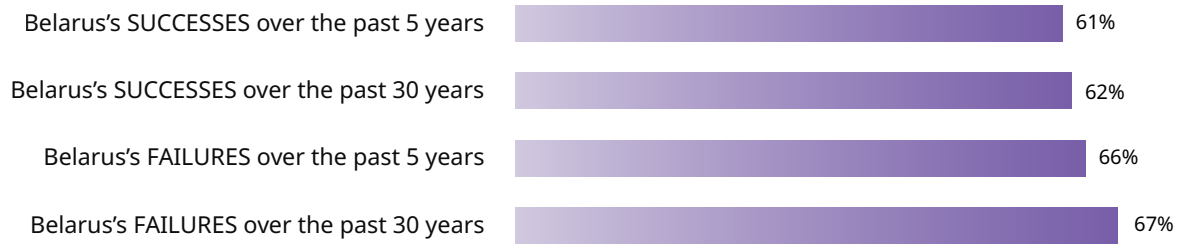
It is worth noting that these two groups — women and young people — also stand out from the rest in other respects. They attach less importance to the protection of rights and freedoms, a priority for most respondents; they are more likely to express satisfaction with the authorities’ performance and to believe that the state acts in the interests of vulnerable groups and public sector employees.

We believe that these perceptions stem from the particular susceptibility of these groups to official propaganda. As a result, women and young people are more inclined than others to see the regime not only as an oppressor, but also as a guardian and protector. For other social groups, the image of the regime as a protector is far less self-evident — and far less appealing.

THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES BELARUSIANS ASSOCIATE WITH THE REGIME

Worsening economic problems, a growing desire for political liberalisation, and mixed assessments of state performance all coexist within what might be called a public 'blank stare' with regard to the country's successes and failures. When asked open-ended questions about Belarus's achievements and setbacks over the past five years and over the thirty years of Lukashenka's rule, two-thirds of respondents were unable to name anything at all.

Share of respondents who gave no answer to open-ended questions about Belarus's successes and failures over the past 5 and 30 years



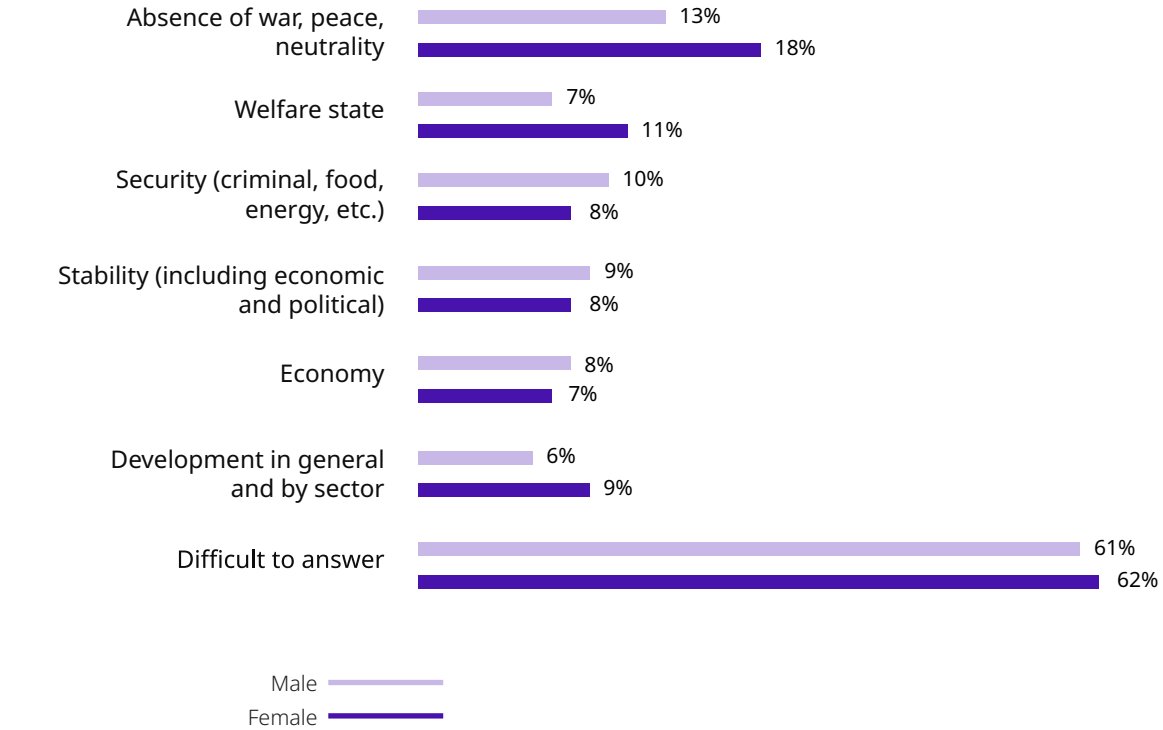
In sociological research, open-ended questions typically receive fewer responses than closed ones, as writing out an answer requires more effort than choosing from a list of options. Still, such a high level of non-response as in these questions is highly unusual.

Such high levels of non-response usually occur when a topic provokes strong discomfort or feels unclear or painful, or alternatively, when questions are unexpected and address issues that are rarely discussed publicly and about which people lack coherent opinions. In this case, both explanations are likely relevant. Discussing the regime's failures is effectively prohibited, while identifying clear national successes may seem difficult for many. The highest shares of respondents unable to name either successes or failures were recorded among women and those aged 18–24.

Those who did express opinions about the country's successes and failures most often cited, among the achievements of the past five years, peace and the absence of war, preservation of the welfare state, and a sense of stability and security in various areas such as energy and food supply. The list of successes over the past thirty years largely mirrors the five-year list, with two additions: preventing economic collapse and maintaining national independence and sovereignty. Overall, respondents tended to view the country's 'successes' not as progress or development, but rather as the preservation of a minimum level of stability across different spheres.

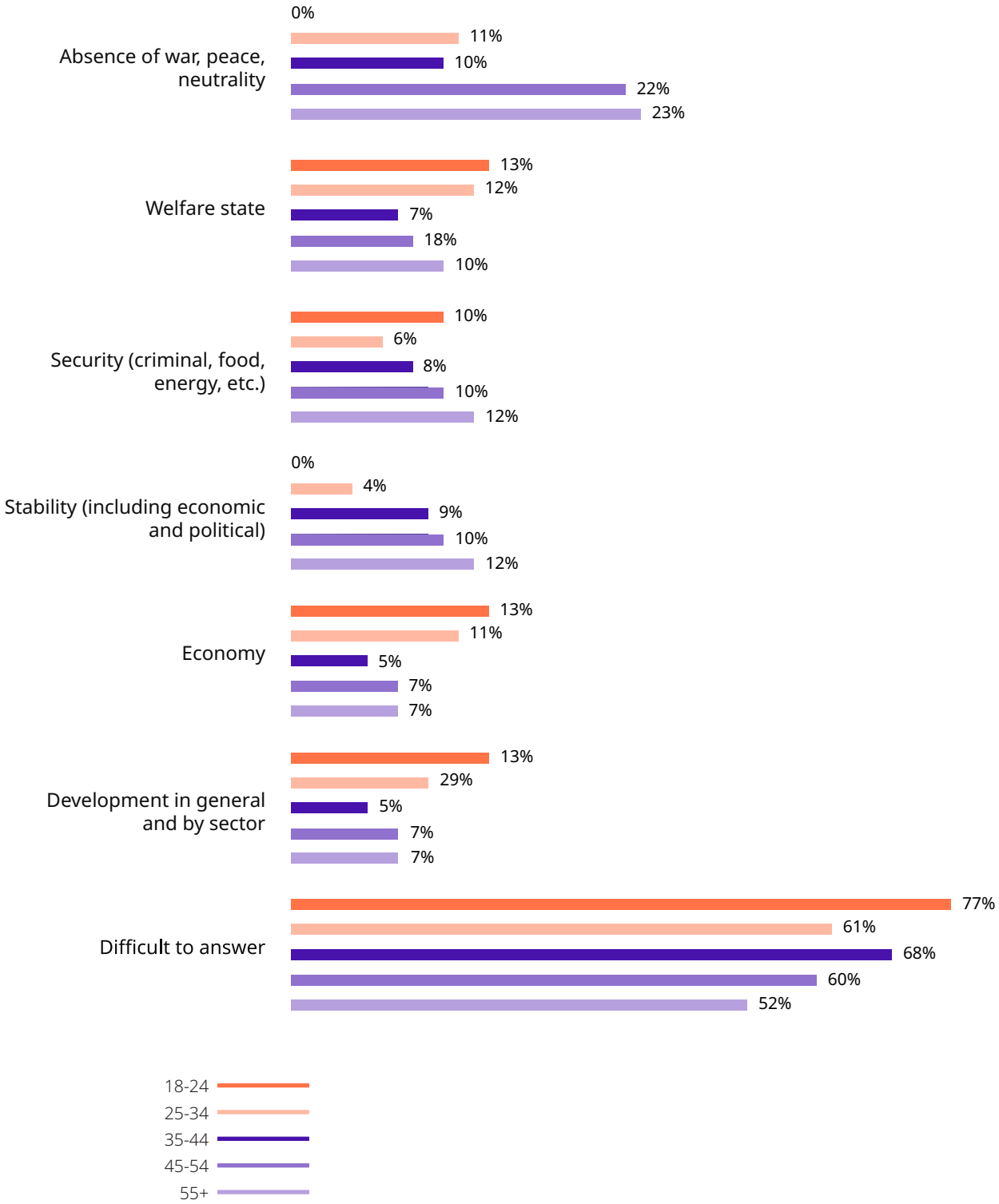
The country's successes over the past five years

Gender



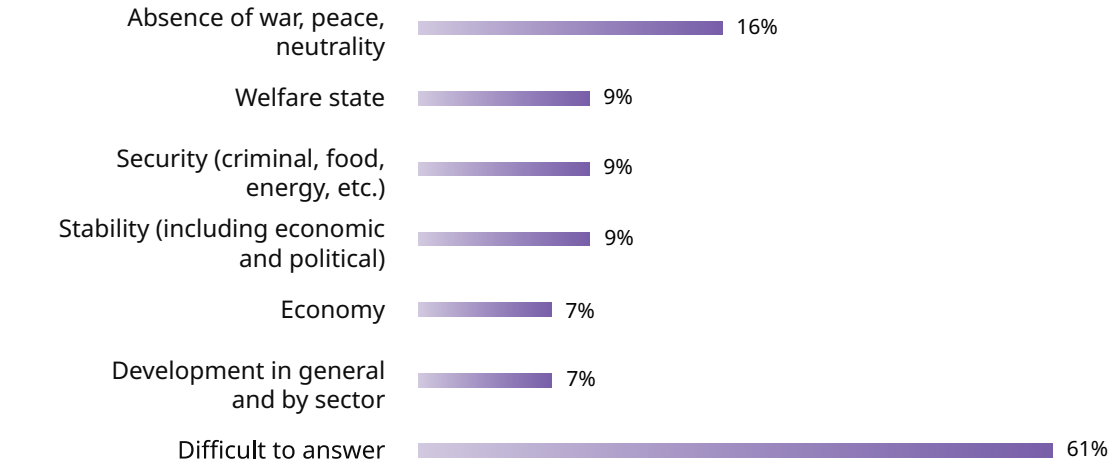
The country's successes over the past five years

Age



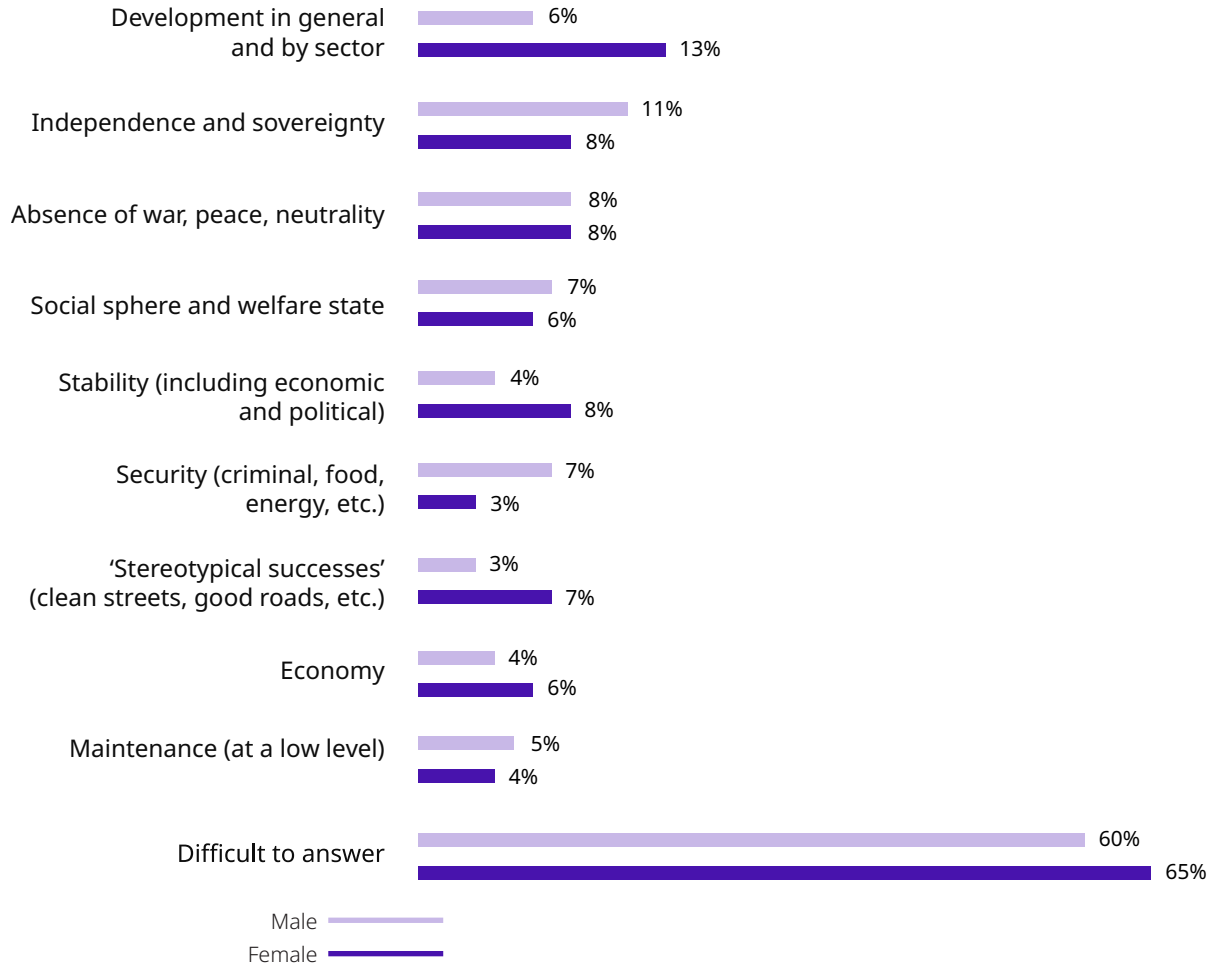
The country's successes over the past five years

Total

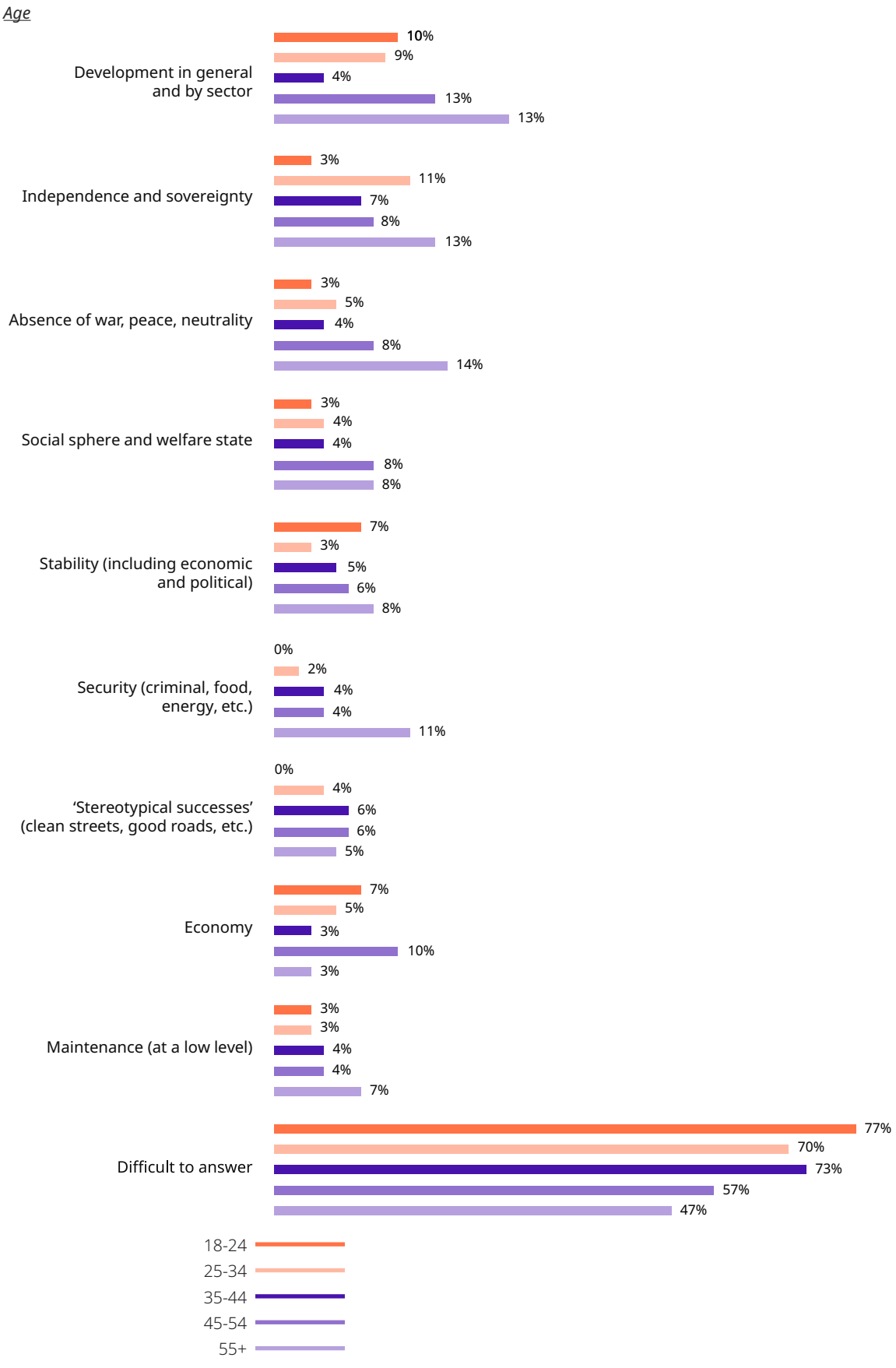


The country's successes over the past 30 years

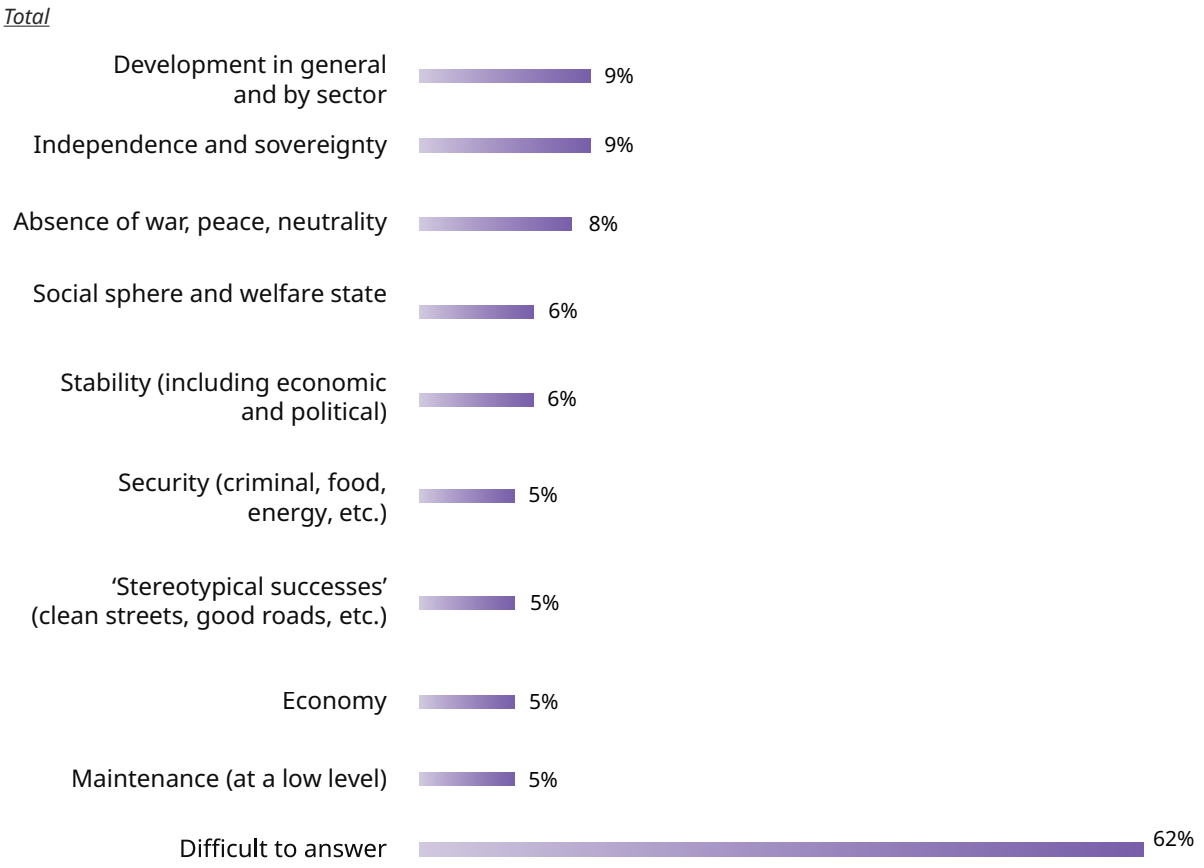
Gender



The country's successes over the past 30 years

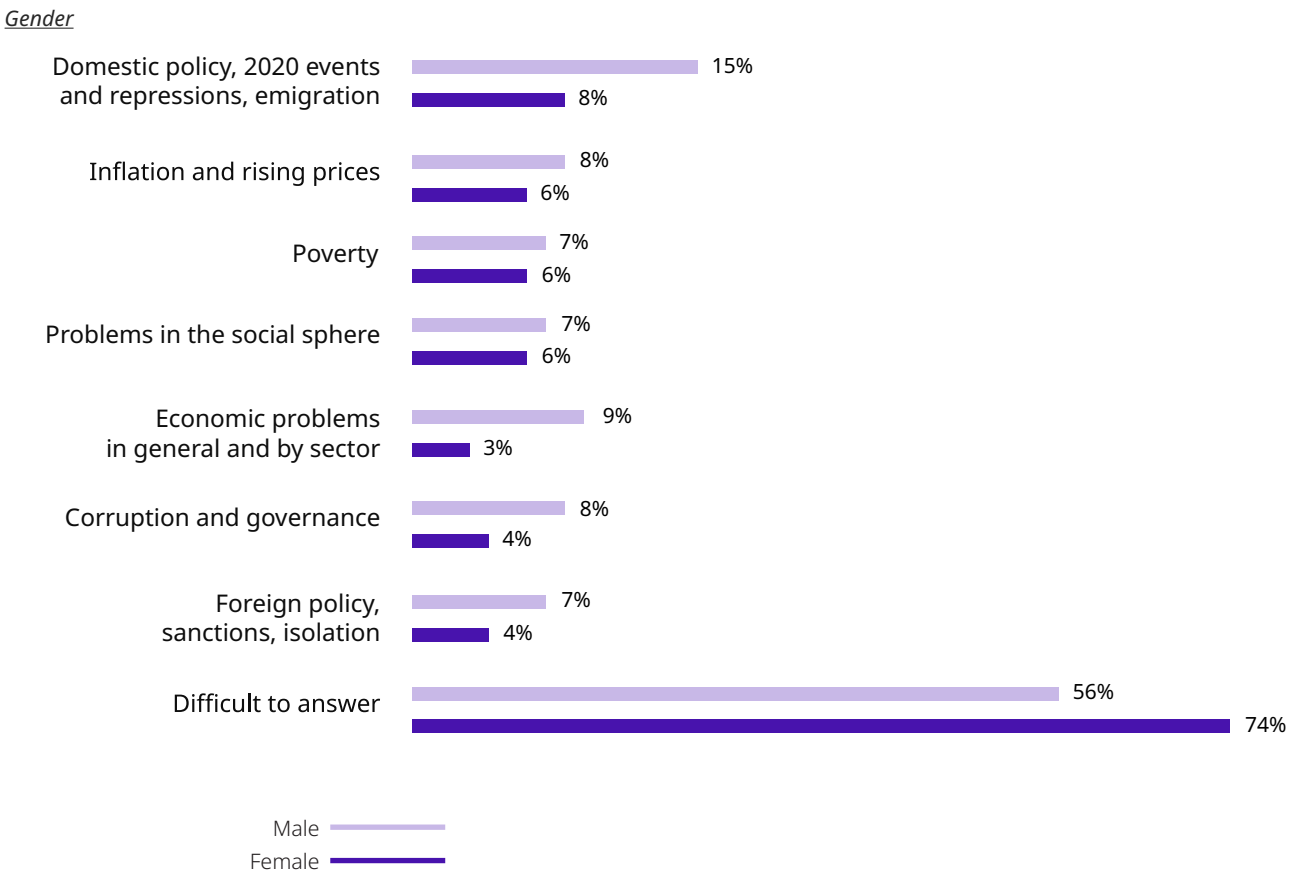


The country's successes over the past 30 years



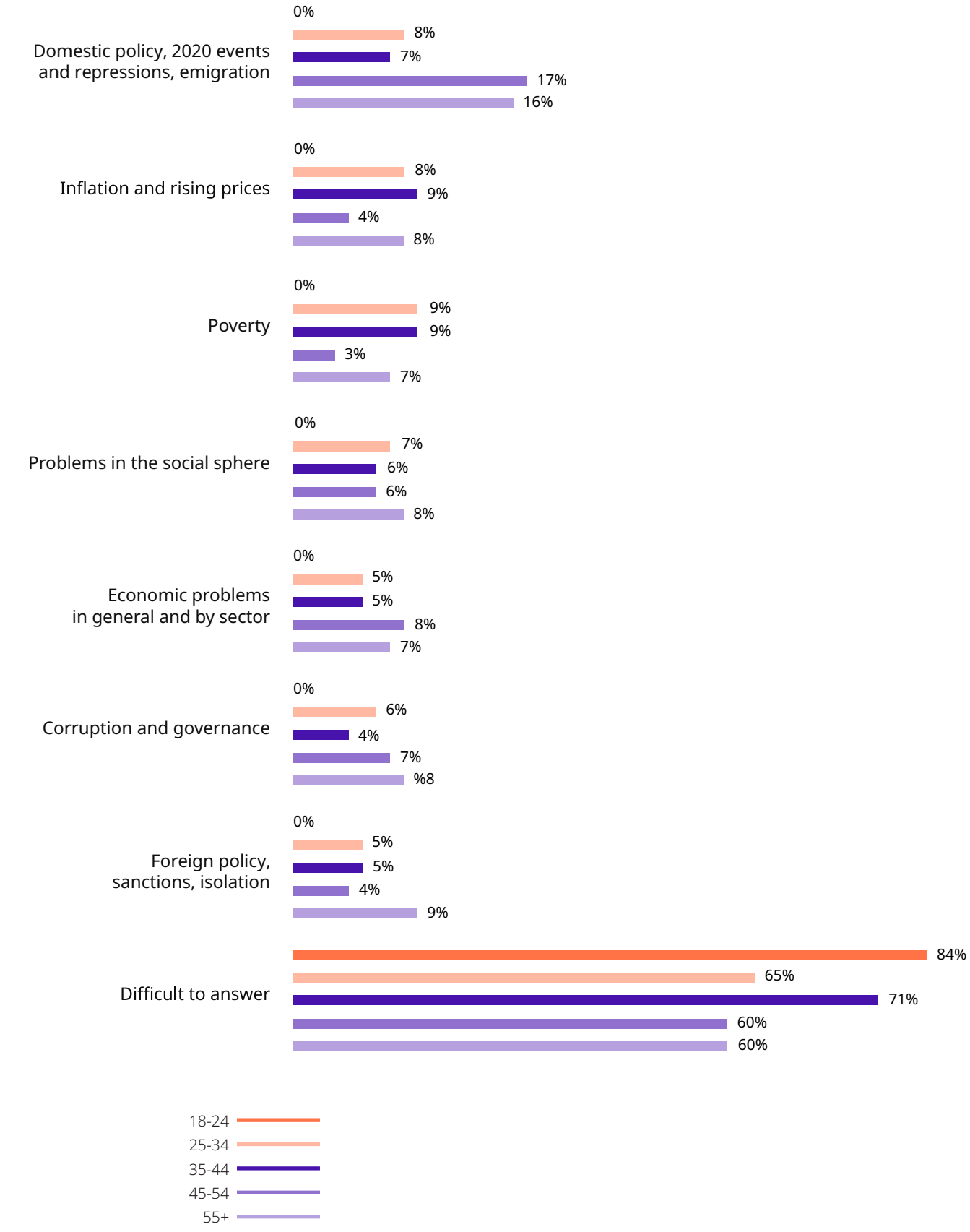
The lists of the main failures over the past five and thirty years are also largely the same: the establishment of authoritarian rule and repression, rising prices despite low wages, economic difficulties, and the country's general decline.

The country’s failures over the past five years



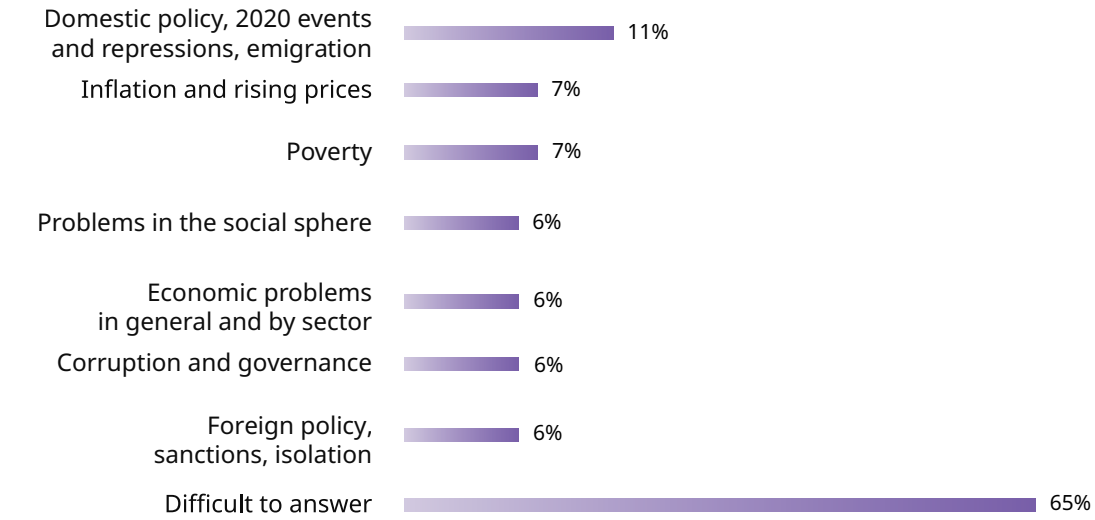
The country's failures over the past five years

Age



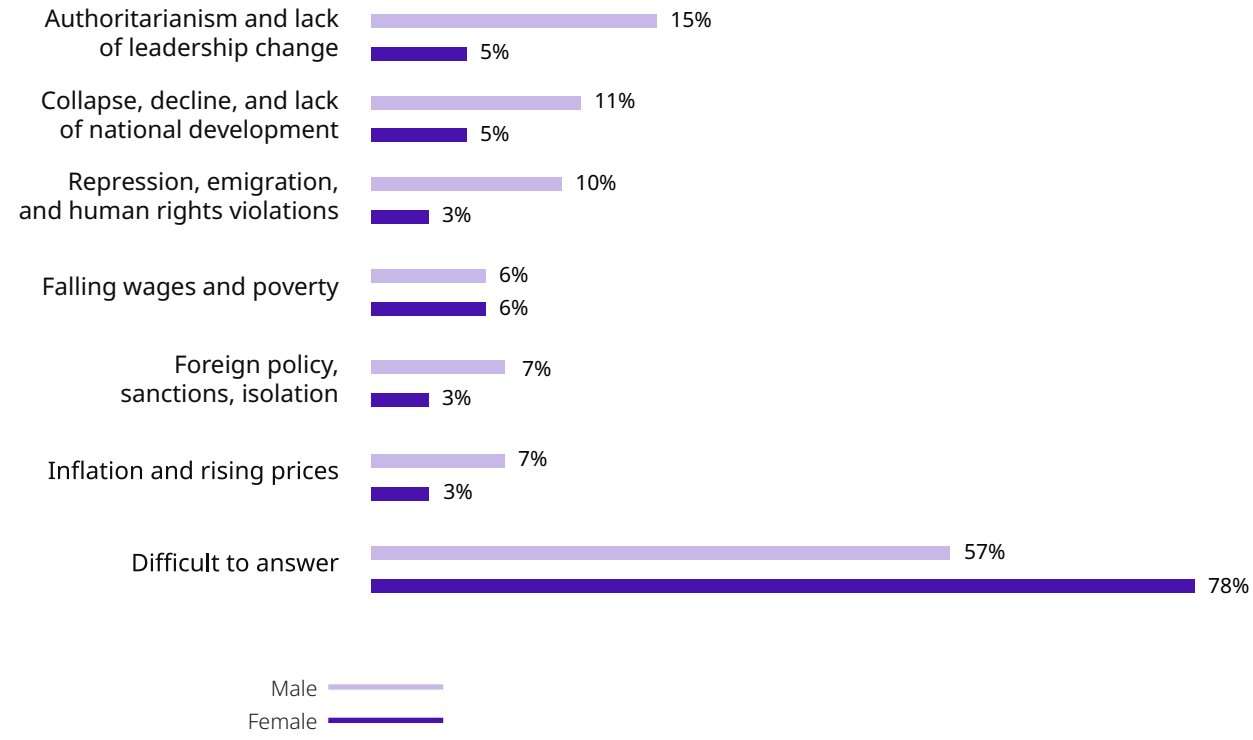
The country's failures over the past five years

Total

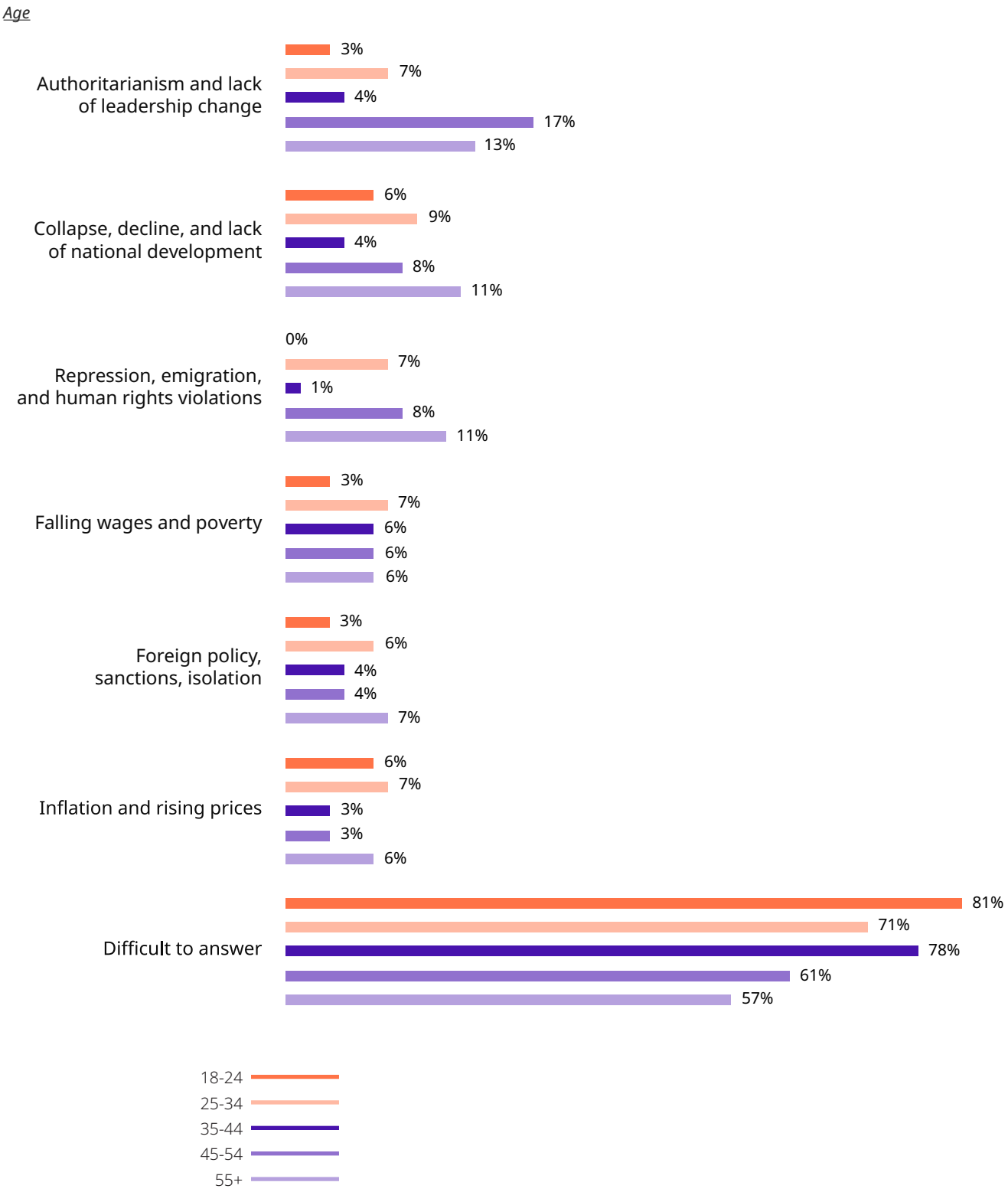


The country's failures over the past 30 years

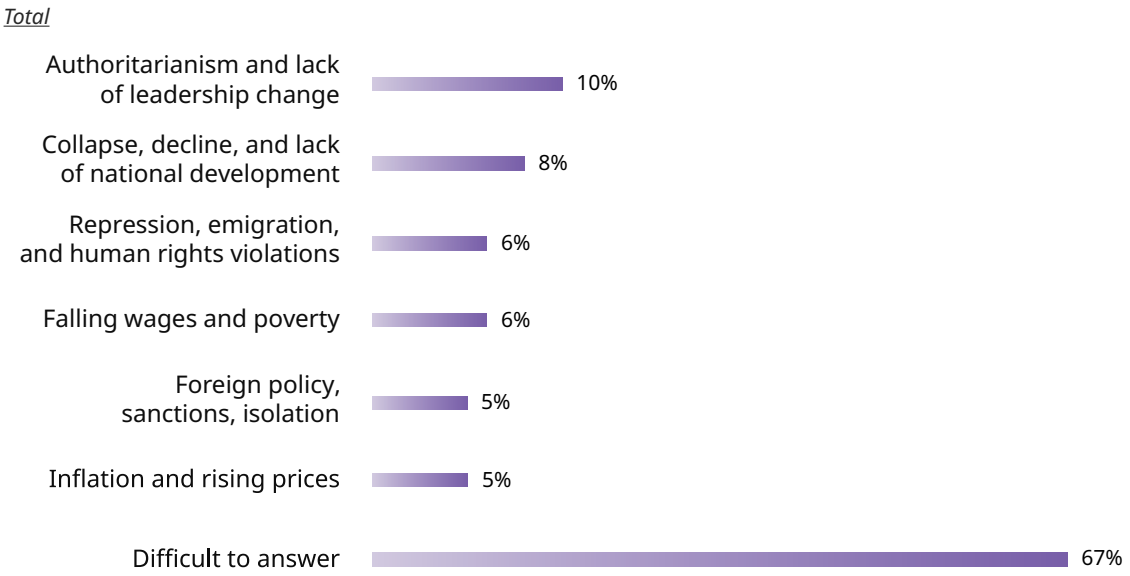
Gender



The country's failures over the past 30 years



The country's failures over the past 30 years



A comparison of the lists of achievements and failures shows that respondents often assess the same areas in opposite ways — some see them as achievements, others as failures.

For example, the current state of the economy is viewed by some as a success, since it continues to function and maintain energy and food security. Others, however, emphasise its weaknesses: inflation, poverty, and a lack of growth in key sectors. The same ambivalence appears in attitudes toward domestic policy — authoritarianism and repression contrasted with stability. Even the notion of the 'social state' in Belarus is interpreted inconsistently: for some respondents, it has all but disappeared; for others, its mere existence, however limited, remains significant.

These contradictions reflect deeper differences in expectations — acceptance of minimal, rigid state guardianship versus a desire for autonomy and liberalisation. In other words, they reveal the divide between seeing the regime as a 'protector' and as an 'oppressor'. At the same time, it seems that a majority of Belarusians now perceive the regime primarily as an aggressor and oppressor and experience the current situation as an ongoing collective trauma — one from which they seek to distance themselves.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we analysed how the image of the Belarusian regime has evolved in the eyes of Belarusians themselves. Our analysis drew on data from several sociological studies, including our own survey of urban residents in Belarus.

Based on the findings, we have identified three main conclusions:

- The Belarusian regime is a distinctive example of an authoritarian 'trauma manager'. It skilfully combines the roles of 'protector' and 'oppressor', systematically using collective trauma as a key tool of both domestic and external governance

- In the relationship between the authorities and society, the role of the victim is central. It is the acceptance or rejection of this role that determines which face of the regime — the 'protector' or the 'oppressor' — comes to the fore.

- Recent trends point to the growing dominance of the 'oppressor' element. This calls into question the regime's ability to sustain its long-standing compromise with society and, in doing so, undermines the foundation of its social legitimacy.

Many political regimes manipulate collective trauma to legitimise themselves. What makes the Belarusian case distinct, however, is that the regime uses collective trauma not only as a tool of consolidation, but also as a mechanism for the continual retraumatisation of its own society.

At the same time, the regime is both perceived by society — and presents itself — as a 'protector', ostensibly shielding people from threats, and as an 'oppressor', the very source of those threats. Within the logic of collective trauma, these are two poles of a single role — as the role of the aggressor cannot exist without a victim.

Whereas in most cases the source and the bearer of collective trauma are separated temporaly — and often geographically — in Belarus they coexist in the same moment and place. This creates a complex web of interdependence, in which the determining factor is not so much the actions of the authorities as the position of society itself: whether it accepts or rejects the role of victim assigned to it.

When society accepts this status — as it did in the 1990s — the regime's aggressive stance is largely interpreted as benevolent guardianship, and the regime itself as a protective caretaker. But when, as in 2020, society rejects this dependent role, refuses the identity of victim, and seeks to assert itself as an active subject — a hero — the authorities openly shift into the role of oppressor, behaving as a wounded aggressor.

The outbreak of full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 disrupted the internal logic of the 'aggressor–victim' dynamic. The 'war factor' and fears of economic crisis strengthened, in the public mind, the pre-2020 image of the Belarusian regime as the nation's protector and guardian. In the context of war, this image also took on an additional, 'peacekeeping' dimension.

Two to three years later, the initially positive effect of the war factor on the image of the Belarusian regime began to fade, and its supposed peacekeeping mission lost credibility.

Public attention has shifted back to the country's excessive repression and the everyday economic difficulties faced by ordinary people. Half of society believes that the modern Belarusian state protects either the interests of the ruling elite or those of 'who knows whom'. At the same time, most respondents prefer to distance themselves from issues that extend beyond the boundaries of daily life.

APPENDIX

Would you like to see the USSR restored? (%)[44]

	1993	1997	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011	2013	2015
Yes	55	50	38	39	40	27	22	24	22	28
No	22	26	30	43	51	63	63	61	59	59
'Difficult to say' / 'No answer'	23	25	32	19	10	10	15	15	19	17

Detailed distribution of responses to questions about issues that concerned respondents between 2009 and 2025 (based on data from the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and the Center for New Ideas).

	2009	2019	2020			2022	2025
			FEBRUARY	JUNE	SEPTEMBER		
Inflation (devaluation of money)	21	31	45	42	41	40	*
Prices for food and essential goods	50	54	63	64	46	52	*
Inflation and rising prices	*	*	*	*	*	*	49
(High) cost of utilities	37	41	44	41	26	31	21
INFLATION AND PRICES	**36**	**42**	**51**	**49**	**38**	**41**	**24**
Wage levels	46	51	55	49	36	44	*
Low salaries	*	*	*	*	*	*	49
Level of pension provision	16	24	29	24	18	14	*
Small pensions	*	*	*	*	*	*	33
WAGES AND PENSIONS	**31**	**38**	**42**	**37**	**27**	**29**	**41**

[41] Актуальные тренды (НИСЭПИ) [Current trends (IISEPS)].

	2009	2019	2020			2022	2025
			FEBRUARY	JUNE	SEPTEMBER		
Rising alcohol abuse	30	22	30	23	14	16	–
Spread of drug addiction	17	14	20	10	9	11	–
ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG ABUSE	**24**	**18**	**25**	**16**	**12**	**14**	**–**
Condition of your own health	46	36	47	43	36	41	–
Health of your loved ones	–	–	–	–	–	50	–
Epidemiological situation in the country	–	–	–	55	31	36	–
HEALTH	46	36	47	49	34	42	–
Housing problems	33	26	36	30	22	24	–
Risk of job loss	17	16	18	14	8	12	–
Impossibility of finding a good job	–	–	–	–	–		22
Relationships within your family	14	18	17	10	9	9	–
EVERYDAY LIFE	21	20	24	18	13	15	**22**
Quality (and accessibility) of medical care and medicines	40	27	37	35	31	31	26
Timeliness of salary and pension payments	28	–	21	12	11	13	–
Quality of the education system	–	–	–	–	–	–	15
SOCIAL SPHERE	34	27	29	23	21	22	**20**
Social inequality between rich and poor	14	23	31	21	18	20	15
Division of society into ‘us’ and ‘them’	–	–	–	–	**35**	**27**	–
Social tension in society	–	–	–	–	25	14	–
Corruption	–	–	–	–	–	–	16
SOCIAL DIVISION / POLARISATION	14	23	31	21	26	20	**15**

	2009	2019	2020			2022	2025
			FEBRUARY	JUNE	SEPTEMBER		
Quality of the judicial system	–	–	–	–	–	–	15
Use of disproportionate force against protesters and detainees	–	–	–	–	43	–	–
Use of repressive measures by the authorities against citizens who supported the protest movement	–	–	–	–	38	16	–
Corruption	–	–	–	–	–	–	16
HUMAN RIGHTS	**–**	**–**	**–**	**–**	**40**	**16**	**15**
External threat to Belarus's territorial integrity	–	–	–	–	24	18	
Risk of participation in wars and international conflicts	–	–	–	–	–	–	29
THREAT TO TER. INTEGRITY / WAR					24	18	28
(Unfavourable) environmental situation	14	17	27	25	12	10	3
Personal safety	18	15	21	14	42	38	–
Loss of public trust in state institutions	–	–	–	–	29	17	–
Migration crisis at the Belarusian border	–	–	–	–	–	25	–
High levels of emigration from the country	–	–	–	–	–	–	21
Low rate of economic growth	–	–	–	–	–	–	19
Level of public security	–	–	–	–	–	–	3
Sanctions from Europe and the United States	–	–	–	–	–	–	26
OTHER	**16**	**16**	**24**	**19**	**28**	**22**	**14**

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