CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS

HOW BELARUSIAN YOUTH ADAPT TO UNCERTAINTY

Darya Urban, Center for New Ideas | April 2026

Co-funded by
the European Union

SUMMARY

A Manageable Present, An Anxious Future

Young respondents in Belarus largely describe their daily situation as manageable. They rate their financial situation and sense of security relatively positively. More vulnerable is their emotional well-being: roughly one in five rates it as poor or rather poor. This points to a disconnect between their outward adaptation and internal well-being.

Anxiety is systemic in nature. Economic, social, and existential fears are statistically linked and form a common emotional backdrop, characterized not so much by current problems as by the respondents' expectations of a possible deterioration in their situation. At the same time, respondents express anxiety about the future of the country and their loved ones, existential concerns, and doubts about their professional prospects.

On a personal level, there is a noticeable tension between stability and freedom: people generally lean toward desiring one or the other. When it comes to the country's future, the picture is different – young people are open to simultaneously supporting stable institutions and the expansion of freedoms.

Geopolitical orientations are also hybrid in nature: there is no clear division between "pro-Russian" and "pro-Western" positions among young Belarusians.

Emigration as a Fallback Option

Only a minority express a firm intention to leave, yet about half consider emigration as a possible option. This points to the conditional nature of their confidence in the future: even when they sense progress and a connection between effort and results, the option of moving abroad remains a "fallback scenario." The main motives are pragmatic in nature — economic constraints and a lack of prospects at home. At the same time, family, loved ones, and the familiar environment remain the key factors discouraging emigration.

Adaptation Strategies

Young people's adaptive behavior is aimed more at maintaining internal stability than at changing their environment. They routinely resort to simple methods to reduce stress levels: retreating online, immersing oneself in work or study, hobbies, and daily routines. Factor and cluster analysis identified four stable types of adaptation:

- Everyday adaptation — maintaining a familiar daily routine without deliberate reflection or defense strategies.
- Pragmatic avoidance — a conscious reduction in involvement in public life: caution in speech, avoidance of sensitive topics.
- Reflection and socialization — relying on loved ones, creativity, and irony; associated with lower anxiety levels.
- Escapism — retreating online and social isolation; this temporarily reduces stress, but is also associated with higher anxiety overall.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement tends to be sporadic: regular participation is rare and does not constitute a widespread norm. At the same time, the desire to participate in civic activity is consistently higher than actual participation — there is a demand for involvement, but it rarely translates into action.

The key condition for the transition from interest to action remains the presence of a clear and tangible outcome. If the expected outcome is not obvious, interest does not translate into participation. This indicates that the main barrier is related to perceived effectiveness, rather than a lack of motivation.

Opportunity Infrastructure

Trust is primarily placed in one's immediate circle — friends, acquaintances, and colleagues. Trust in educational and medical institutions remains relatively stable, whereas attitudes toward government bodies and the media are more distant.

Education is perceived primarily as a tool for strengthening one's position in the labor market, rather than as a symbol of status. Its value is derived from its practical effects, such as its impact on income and career. A willingness to consider studying abroad suggests that loyalty to the Belarusian education system is conditional.

In third-sector educational initiatives, as in the case of civic participation, there is a persistent gap between interest and action: on average, young people participate roughly half as often as they report being willing to. The barrier is linked more to trust in these formats and the conditions under which they are implemented than to a lack of motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2020, the political and social environment in Belarus has become more strained and less predictable. The public sphere has narrowed, opportunities for open participation have declined, and virtually any form of collective or civic engagement has come to be perceived as risky. Over time this situation, once viewed as a crisis, has become everyday reality. A new generation is coming of age in these conditions.

This context influences how young people view their future, what strategies they choose, and the extent to which they feel capable of influencing their lives. Analyzing young people's situation therefore requires recording not only their sentiments, but also understanding their everyday coping strategies. It is important to understand what options they consider feasible and the conditions in which they remain willing to take action. What exactly helps them to stay afloat in such conditions?

The primary objective of this study is to identify the conditions under which young people retain the ability to plan, develop, and participate in public life.

It is based on online interviews, conducted between December 3 and December 18, 2025, using the CAWI method. The sample comprises 465 respondents[1] and reflects the structure of the urban population of Belarus aged 18 to 30. The data were weighted by gender and region of residence in accordance with official Belstat statistics for 2022.

The data collection method is appropriate for the target audience. According to quantitative research from late 2022, more than 98 percent of urban residents in the 18-30 age group use the internet. The interview break-off rate was 21.7 percent

[1] The final sample size (n=465) results in a statistical margin of error for the estimated shares of no more than ±4.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level, under the assumption of a simple random sample. The actual margin of error for specific indicators may vary depending on their distribution and the application of weights.

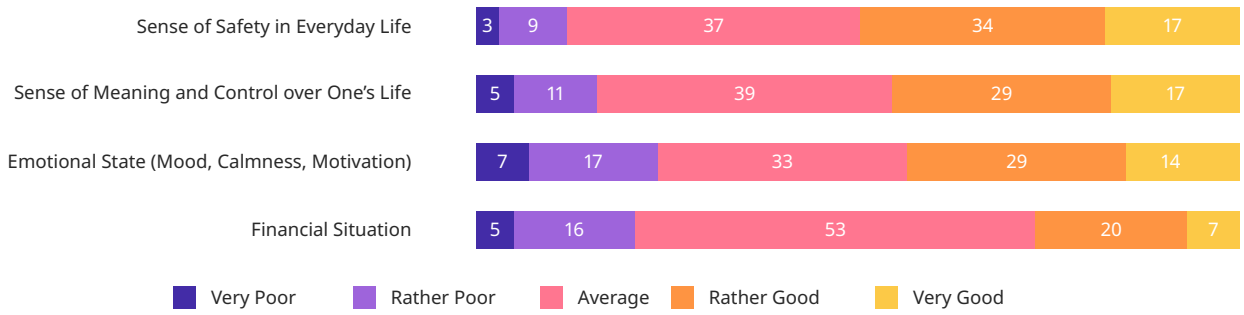
A MANAGEABLE PRESENT, AN ANXIOUS FUTURE

We begin with a general assessment of everyday life. We are interested in whether uncertainty has become normalized at the level of daily life, because even if the macroenvironment remains unfavorable, adaptation can occur at the individual level.

No Catastrophe

Respondents were asked to assess their current situation based on four parameters: their financial situation, sense of security, emotional state, and sense of meaning and control over their own lives (Figure 1). The "average" category dominates across all indicators, with a substantial share of responses being moderately positive. This means that the situation is not perceived as critical or crisis-like. Everyday life is described as generally manageable.

Figure 1. How Young People Assess Their Current Situation and Quality of Life



"How would you rate your current state?" %

It is important to consider the potential effect of social desirability bias. In a sensitive context, respondents may report greater resilience even when experiencing internal stress because they think it the appropriate response in their social setting. Accordingly, it is not only the proportion of positive and negative responses that matters, but also the relative profile of the indicators.

The most vulnerable area is emotional well-being. Respondents rate their financial situation slightly more positively than their mood and sense of control. This indicates a disconnect between external adaptation and internal well-being. People may be able to manage their current expenses, but at the same time experience fatigue, anxiety, and a diminished sense of control. Roughly one in five respondents rates their condition as poor or rather poor. This represents a persistent area of psychological vulnerability that affects the willingness to plan and act.

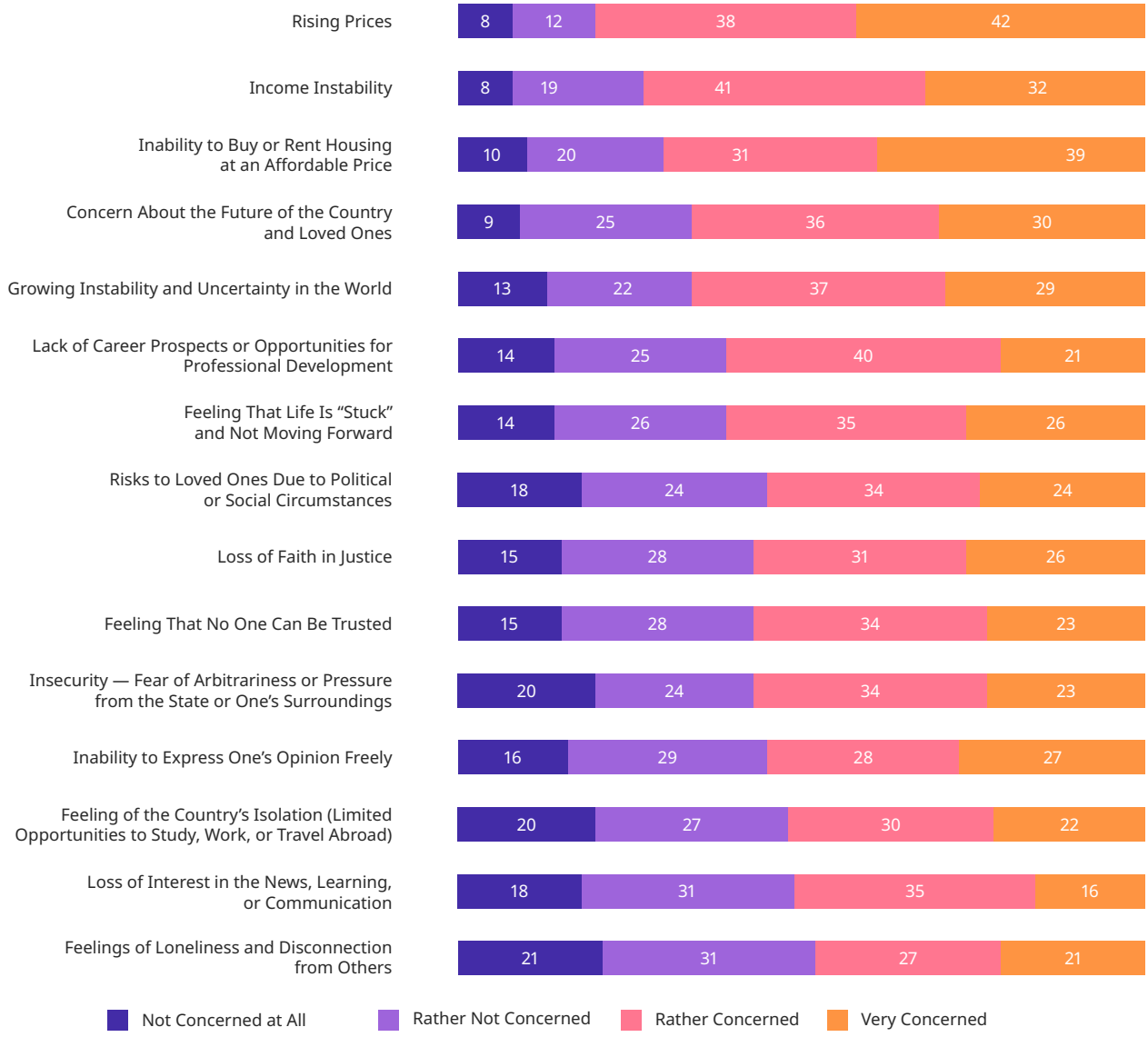
Anxiety is Systemic and Encompasses all Spheres of Life

We now examine the structure of anxiety. While the overall self-assessment of one's situation reflects adaptation, the distribution of the sources of anxiety reveals the emotional backdrop of everyday life (Figure 2).

For most items, a significant proportion of respondents select the options "somewhat

worrisome" and "very worrisome." Anxiety encompasses both economic risks and broader concerns related to the future and instability of the surrounding environment.

Figure 2. Background Anxiety Among Youth: Distribution of Sources and Levels of Concern



"How concerned are you about the following issues?" %

Young people's most pressing concerns are rising prices, income instability, and the inability to resolve housing problems. It is precisely in these areas that "strong concern" is most frequently reported. At the same time, it is important to distinguish between the current situation and expectations for the future. Moderate assessments of financial well-being in the previous question indicate that many people are managing their daily expenses. Economic anxiety, however, reflects not so much the crisis that has already materialized as the risk of a possible downturn in the future. In other words, the present is described as manageable, while the future perceived to be unstable.

Anxiety is not limited to the economy. Comparable levels of concern are associated with fear for the future of the country and loved ones, a sense of global instability, and doubts about one's professional prospects. Other areas of concern include existential anxieties, a sense of life being stuck, a loss of faith in justice, mistrust, and loneliness. This creates a dense emotional backdrop.

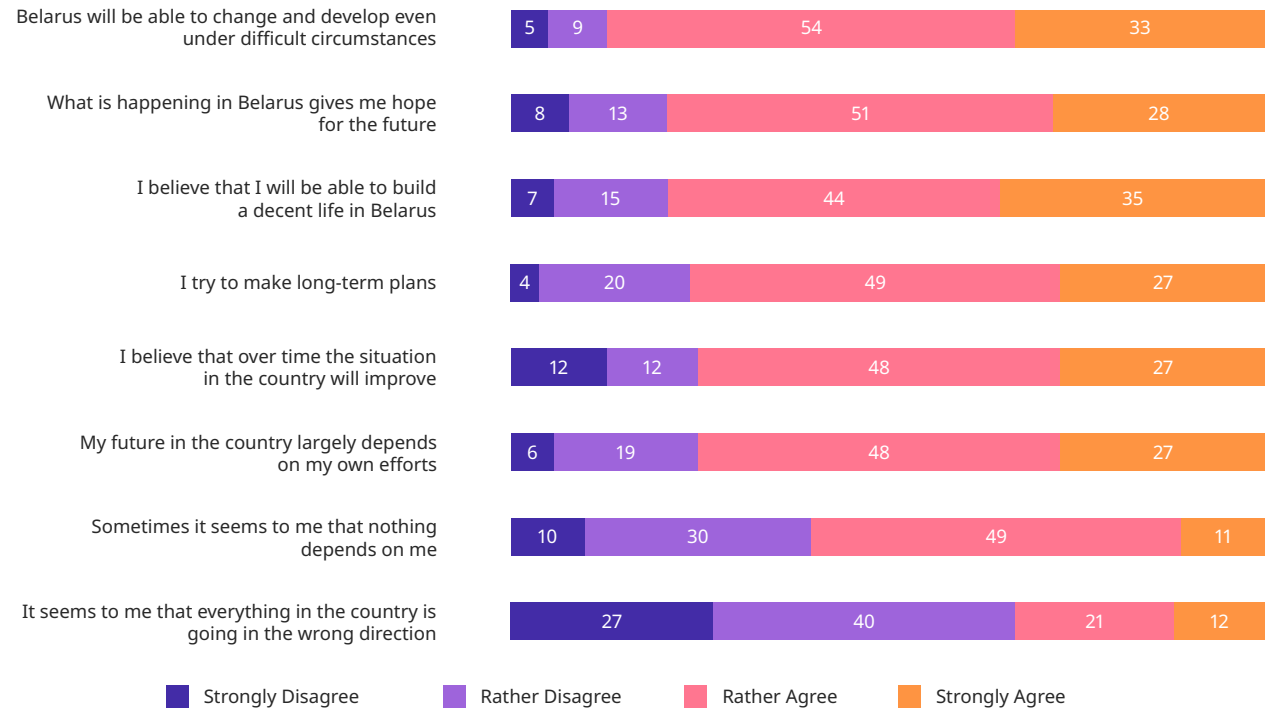
Statistical analysis shows that the different sources of anxiety are closely interrelated. The correlations are stable, and factor analysis reveals a single dominant component. This means that material, social, and meaning-related dimensions of life combine into a general state of tension, rather than existing as isolated and autonomous reactions to individual events.

Even taking into account the proportion of respondents who found it difficult to answer (ranging from 13% to 23% depending on the question), the picture remains consistent. Anxiety is widespread and simultaneously affects the material, social, and existential dimensions of life. It is against this backdrop that attitudes toward the future are formed.

Hope Dominates, Fatalism Persists

This underlying anxiety creates the context for forming expectations about the future. The next step is to examine how young people navigate between hope and fatalism: do they feel that their efforts can yield results, that the future is at least partially open, and that choices exist (Figure 3)? How people answer these questions usually informs how they make decisions about work, education, emigration, or, conversely, about refraining from action. If the horizon of their future narrows, their behavioral strategies change as well. Analyzing hope and fatalism is therefore a way of understanding the real framework within which young people plan and act. Fatalism in this context was defined by assessing the extent to which everything depends on the individual[2].

Figure 3. Hope and Expectations about the Future: Distribution of Responses



"To what extent do you agree with the following statements?" %

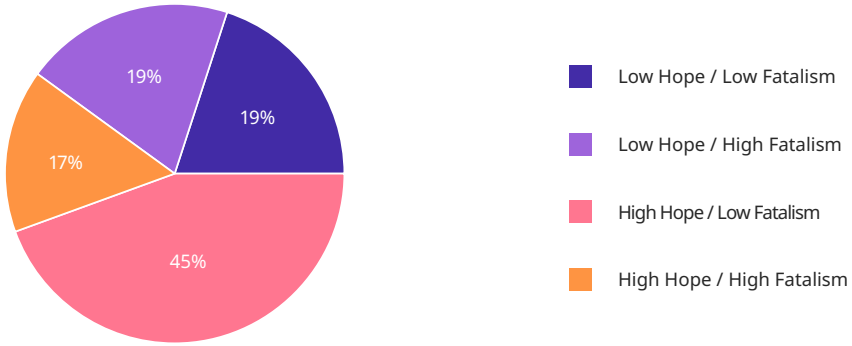
[2] In this study, fatalism was operationalized through agreement with the statement "Sometimes I feel that nothing depends on me and that it is better to just live for today," which was measured on a four-point scale. In factor analysis, this item formed an independent axis, separate from the indicators of hope and subjectivity, allowing it to be considered as a separate latent dimension.

When looking at the responses the picture is less bleak than one might expect, given the prevailing sense of anxiety. Agreement dominates for most statements about the future and personal responsibility. A focus on action and development remains the norm. More than half of respondents, however, agree that "sometimes it seems that nothing depends on me"; consequently, it is important to examine more closely at how a high level of hope aligns with such a level of fatalism.

Young People Generally Believe in a Positive Future

There is a statistically significant but weak correlation between the hope index and the fatalism index. In other words, there is no linear scale where increased hope automatically reduces fatalism; belief in the future and recognition of serious external constraints can coexist in the same person. Analysis of these indices identified four clusters (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Combination of Hope and Fatalism Levels



The largest group consists of young people with a high level of hope and a low level of fatalism. This group should be viewed as the reference group, because they are the ones who feel that the future holds promise and that their actions are meaningful. We will examine the strategies they use to maintain their optimism about their own agency.

High hope coupled with high fatalism tends to emerge in environments where people recognize structural constraints yet refuse to abandon the idea of a bright future. In Belarus, after 2020's events, the political space has severely narrowed, public participation has become risky, and the rules of the system have grown less predictable. In other words, individual influence at the macro level has been limited all this time. As a result, a dual stance emerges: "I will try, but I understand that there is much I cannot influence." Adaptation to a situation of limited agency takes place.

Low hope coupled with low fatalism may arise as a reaction to prolonged uncertainty. When the horizon of major change seems blurred, some young people stop investing emotionally in the idea of a better future yet retain control within the confines of their daily lives. Put differently, they do not expect much from their environment, but neither do they feel completely dependent on it.

The combination of low hope and high fatalism occurs most commonly when people face a combination of constraints: economic instability, a sense of a lack of social mobility, distrust of institutions, and the inability to take public action. In conditions where public activism carries risk, and where opportunities to influence the broader system are minimal, some young people conclude that their efforts make little difference. If we factor in personal negative experiences (such as difficulties with work, housing, or education), a stable pattern of reduced agency takes shape.

As a result, young people cannot simply be divided into optimists and pessimists. Nearly half

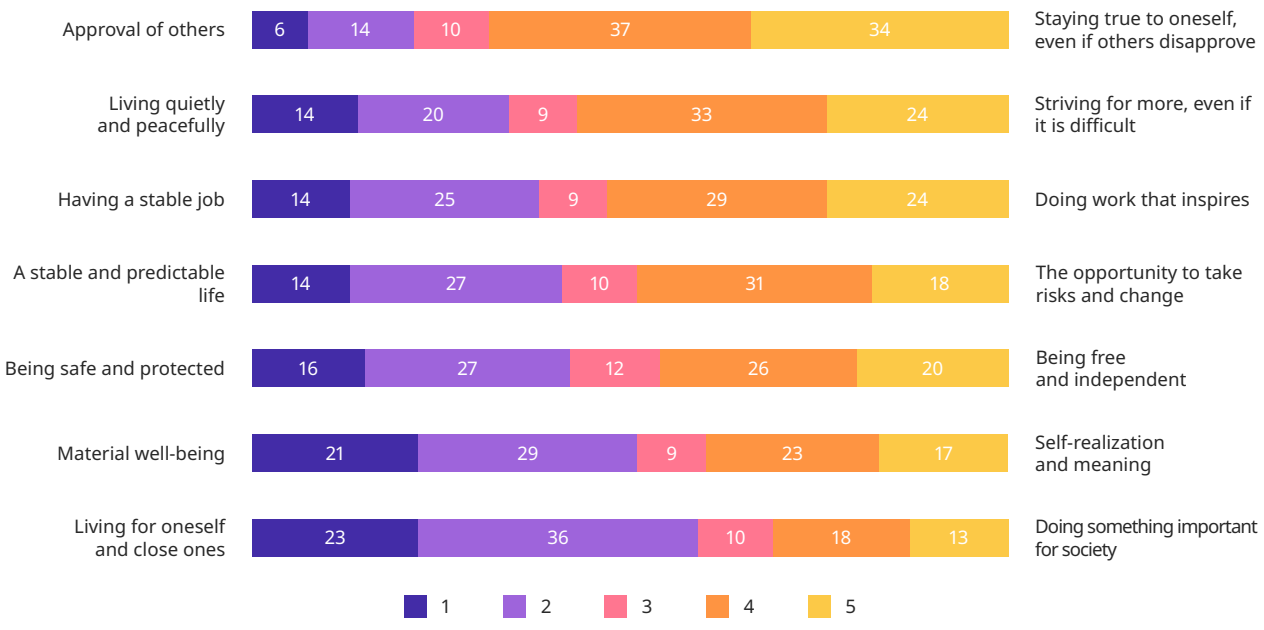
believe in their own abilities and find meaning in their actions. A significant portion looks to the future with hope yet soberly recognizes real limitations. And only a minority feels that the future is closed to them, and that their own efforts make little difference. It is this combination of hope and an understanding of the limitations of one's own capabilities that becomes a key characteristic of the current moment and determines which life strategies young people consider realistic.

Personal Efforts are Significant; Influence on Institutional Processes is Limited

Young people's personal values (Figure 5) are structured around two distinct logics that may seem contradictory. The first is an orientation toward stability and social embeddedness. This includes having steady employment, material well-being, social approval, a close circle of friends, and security. These are values of predictability and recognition: having a foundation, clear rules, a stable income, and the support of one's community. Self-actualization, while important within this logic, is inseparable from a sense of security.

The second logic is linked to freedom and willingness to take risks. Here, independence, the drive to achieve more even under difficult conditions, and a willingness to change one's life — choosing dynamism over stability — are significant factors. These are the values of autonomy and personal choice, even if they entail uncertainty and a rejection of guarantees of stability.

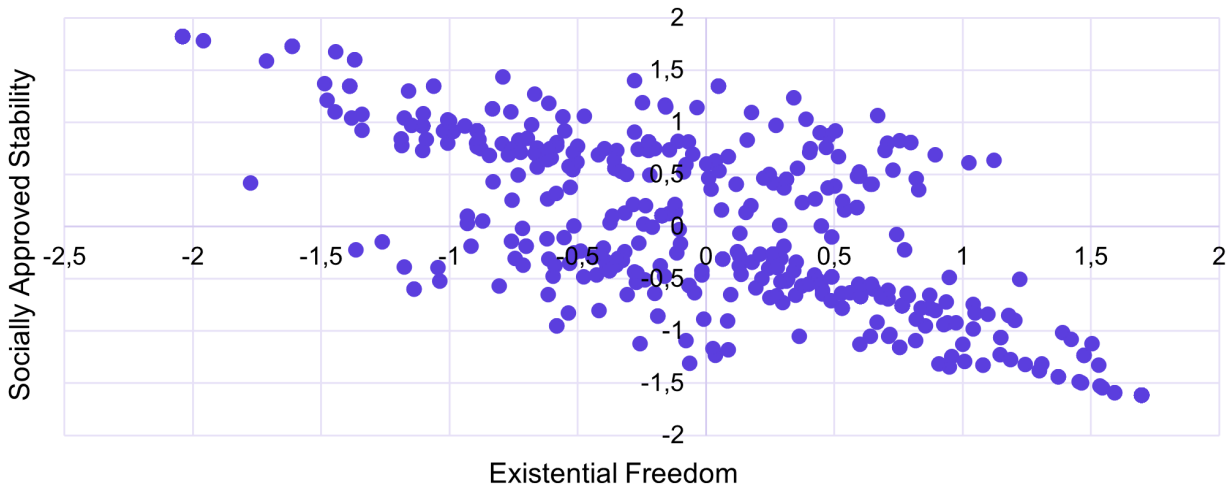
Figure 5. Distribution of Priorities Across Key Personal Value Dilemmas



"What is more important to you personally?" %

At the level of personal values, these two value orientations create a noticeable divide among young people. This is not surprising, since it is quite difficult to reconcile such conflicting values. This is clearly visible in the factor map (Figure 6), which positions socially-approved stability on one axis and existential freedom on the other. Each point represents a separate respondent. The distribution of points shows that a stronger orientation toward freedom is usually accompanied by a weaker orientation toward predictability, and vice versa.

Figure 6. Factor Space of Personal Values



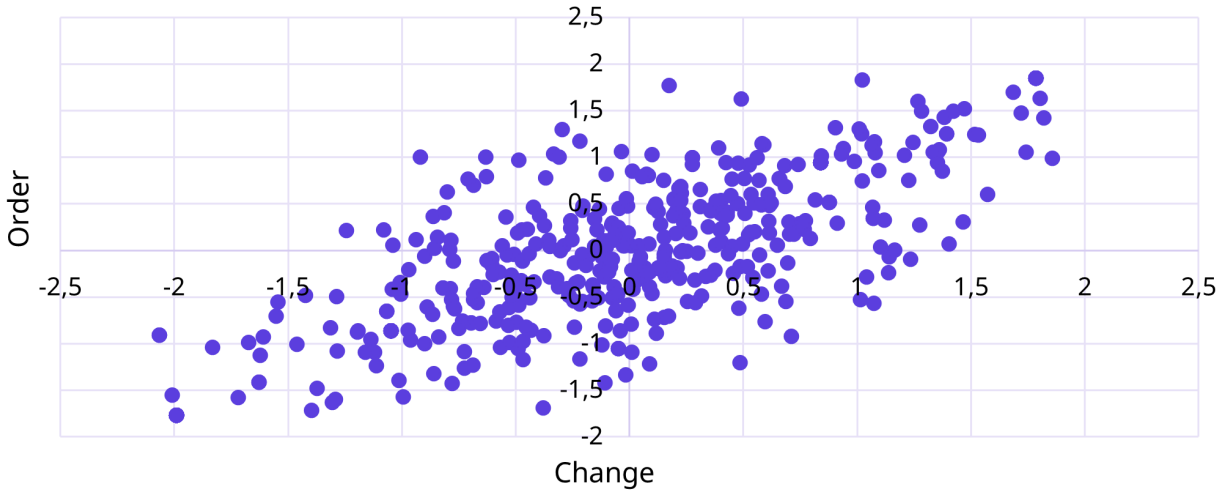
While personal values are organized around a choice between stability and freedom, perceptions of the country's future and values related to the social order are structured differently (Figure 7). Here we observe an attempt to reconcile different orientations.

Figure 7 .Distribution of Priorities Across Key Value Dilemmas of the Social Order

"How do you see the future of the country?" %

Factor analysis (Figure 8) shows that young people's responses cluster around two main dimensions. The first can be tentatively termed "an order-oriented state." This includes expectations of a strong state, a priority given to stability, security as a key task of the government, the preservation of traditional values, and economic security. This is an orientation toward predictability and institutional stability. It expresses a desire for a manageable future where risks are minimized and responsibility concentrated within clear structures.

Figure 8. Factor Space of Political Values



The second dimension is "an openness to change." It encompasses a focus on development and transformation; a willingness to take risks in order to move forward; placing value on civil liberties, a country's independence or its integration into the wider world; and an emphasis on a strong society. Horizontal forms of agency and the recognition of change as the norm are crucial aspects of this dimension.

It is fundamentally important that these two dimensions do not form a rigid opposition. On the factor plot, the points are distributed along a diagonal, not along two isolated poles. This means that there is no inherent contradiction between an orientation toward order and an orientation toward change; they can, and do, coexist within a single system of beliefs. Higher support for development is often accompanied by a stronger demand for stability. **Young people do not divide the future into "either stability or freedom," rather they try to hold onto both orientations simultaneously.**

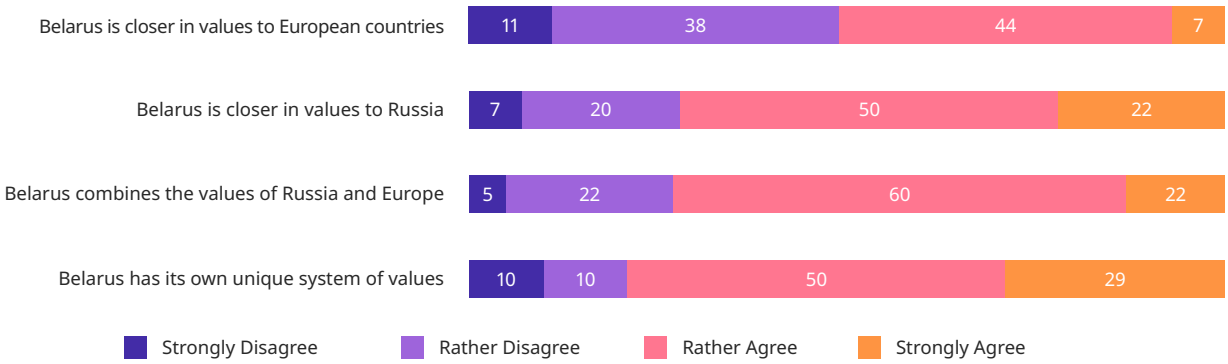
A fundamental difference between the system of collective and individual values becomes apparent. When it comes to the country's future, young people take a more integrative view. That is, the future is imagined as a space of possible balance, where different orientations can be maintained simultaneously.

In personal life, the logic is somewhat different. At the personal level, values are organized in a more polarized way: choosing stability limits the scope for risk, while choosing freedom reduces predictability. Individual life choices require more definite decisions, because the person bears the consequences alone. Therefore, personal life turns out to be less open to compromise than the collective imagination. It is in this divergence that a potential tension arises between the kind of society one would like to live in and the way a person builds their own life.

Hybrid Geopolitical Identity, Not Polarization

In light of the geopolitical events of recent years, one wants to understand which countries' value systems young people perceive as similar to Belarus's. An analysis of the descriptive distributions across four statements on value orientations revealed the absence of a dominant vector (Figure 9). Responses are concentrated in the moderate range. No sharp polarization is observed.

Figure 9. Perceptions of Belarus's Value Affiliation



"How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements? %

Correlation analysis showed that these statements do not form a single continuum. In other words, there is no significant negative correlation between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations. This means that the data cannot be interpreted as a simple "either-or" scale and that agreement with one orientation does not automatically imply disagreement with the other.

The idea of combining Russian and European values is linked to both pro-Russian and pro-European orientations separately. This is to say that it is supported by people holding different positions; it does not function as a compromise between opposites, rather it unites them. The same applies to the notion of Belarus's uniqueness. Recognizing the country's distinct path does not require rejecting any external orientation. As a result, different external orientations and the idea of uniqueness can be combined in various ways and coexist within a single system of views. Such a configuration requires an analysis of the types of combinations, and for this purpose, a cluster analysis was conducted[3].

The final typology identifies three substantive types (Figure 10):

Russia-oriented (48%). This group is characterized by a tendency toward a Russian foreign policy orientation while simultaneously acknowledging Belarus's uniqueness. The idea of combining Russian and European values does not play a central role for them.

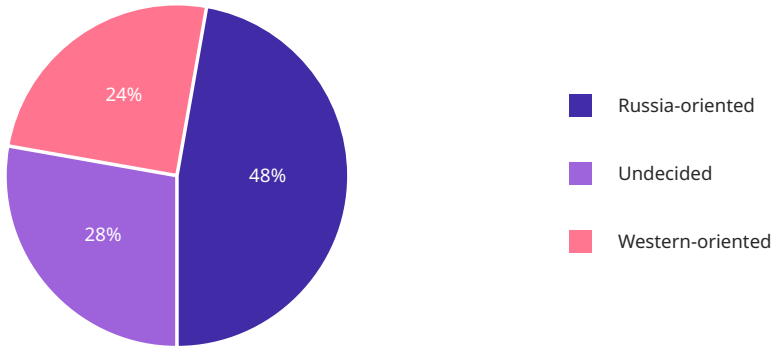
Western-oriented (24%). This group is characterized by a deliberate hybrid orientation. They are more likely to support the idea of combining values while acknowledging the country's uniqueness, with greater openness toward a European orientation.

Undecided (28%). This group is distinguished by a lack of clear identification with any

[3] The model identified four clusters, but one of the clusters exhibited an undifferentiated profile — a similar level of agreement across all items. This result may indicate a formal response style or the absence of a clearly articulated position. This cluster was not interpreted in terms of content and was excluded from further analysis.

particular orientation. It is characterized by caution and distancing from rigid frameworks. The idea of a combination is accepted, but without strong conviction. A position of uncertainty prevails here.

Figure 10. Distribution of Value Orientation Clusters



Overall, the resulting clusters show that young people's geopolitical and value orientations form several types of combinations and are not polarized. This distribution of orientations largely reflects the very nature of the current geopolitical situation surrounding Belarus.

First, the country finds itself in a state of structural dependence on Russia while simultaneously maintaining its formal sovereignty. On the one hand, there are close economic and political ties with its giant neighbor. On the other, there is geographical, historical, and cultural integration into the European space. Young people consequently live in a system where both vectors are present simultaneously, which is why their responses do not break down into rigid alternatives.

Second, since 2020, virtually any public statements or discussions even indirectly related to politics are fraught with risk. Expressing a geopolitical stance is undoubtedly among the most "sensitive" topics. Under such conditions, openly identifying with a particular stance can be perceived as problematic. This reinforces caution and explains the high proportion of moderate and undecided responses. Avoiding extreme positions becomes a rational strategy.

Third, the global agenda itself has changed. The war in Ukraine, sanctions pressure, and economic turbulence have intensified the sense of instability. When the international environment appears conflict-ridden, an orientation toward "combination" or "uniqueness" becomes a way of preserving a sense of autonomy.

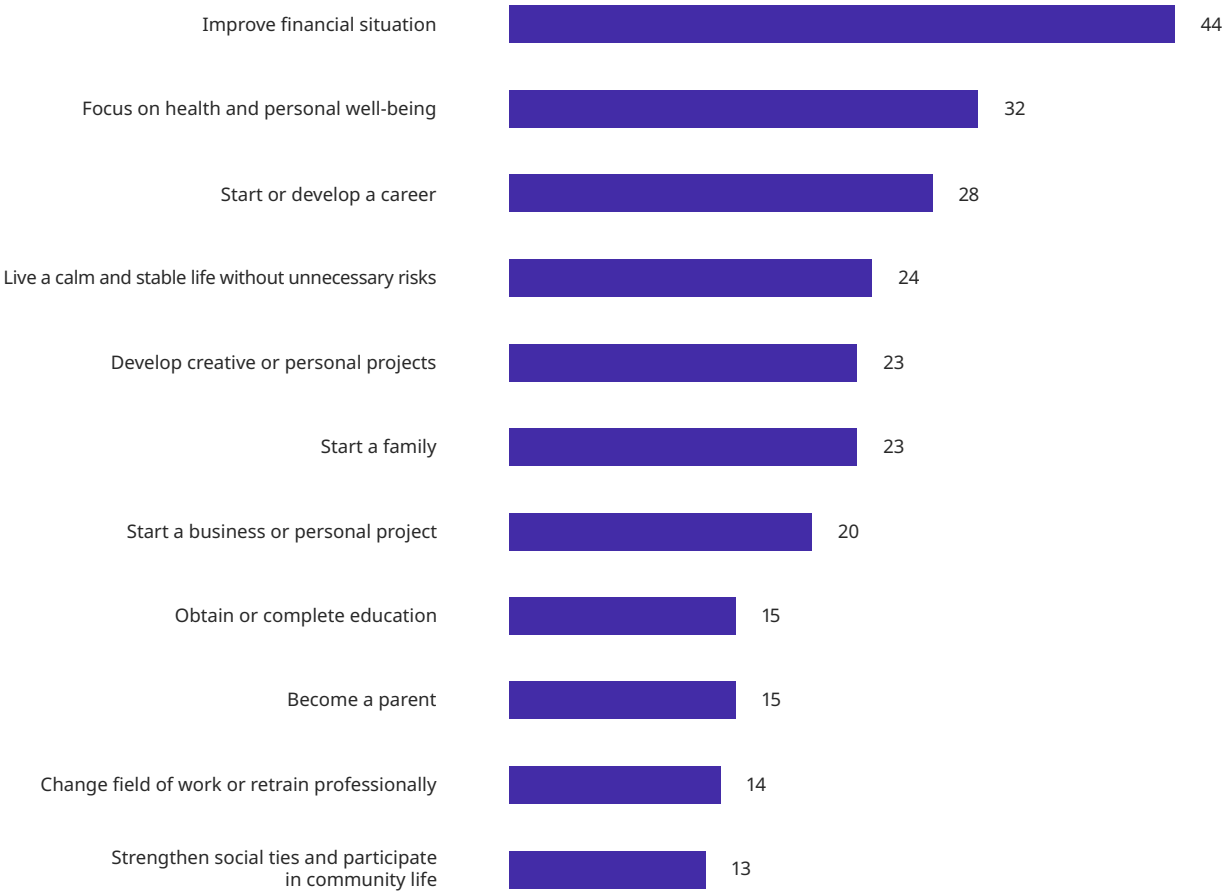
Finally, for a generation that has grown up in conditions of hybrid identity, the idea of synthesis seems natural. Young people simultaneously consume Russian, European, and global cultural content, meaning that the geopolitical framework in their experience is no longer binary. Hybrid orientations therefore reflect not only caution but also real social experience.

As a result, we observe adaptation to a complex environment. Agreeing with several statements that, at first glance, seem incompatible is a way of maintaining a breadth of choice. In conditions where clear self-identification can limit one's scope of action, such a position allows one to keep potential paths open.

Plans for the Coming Years: Risk Reduction

How do young people's plans for the next 3–5 years look in light of everything described above? The first thing that stands out is that young people are building a strategy for risk minimization, rather than a strategy for development and growth.

Figure 11. Plans for the Next 3–5 Years



"What are your plans for the next 3–5 years?" %

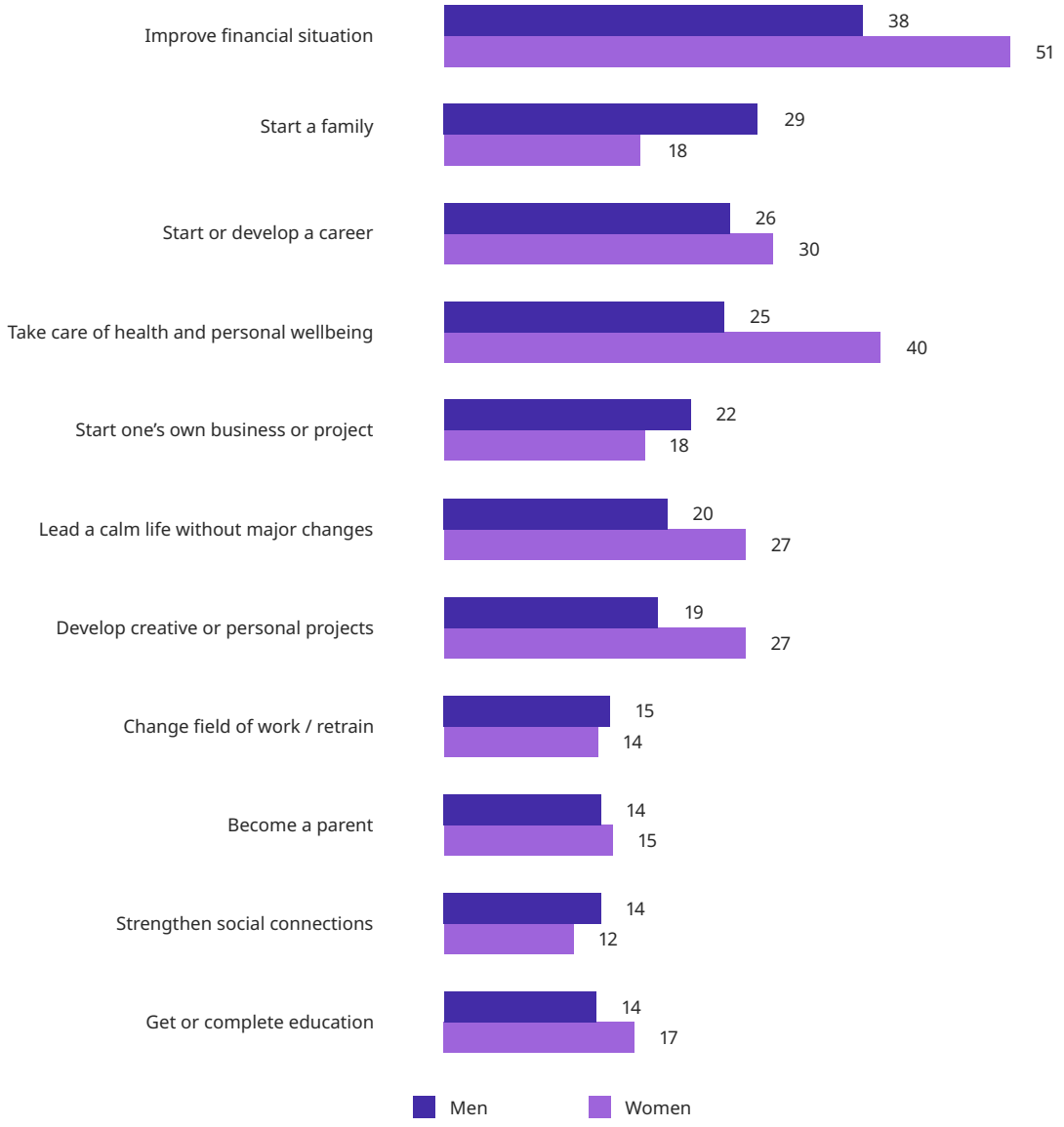
This does not reflect a loss of ambition. Rather, it suggests that the scope of young people's ambitions has narrowed to a manageable level. In an environment where the macro-environment is perceived as unstable and unpredictable, it becomes rational to prioritize more personal and easily controllable areas: income, health, personal projects, and close relationships. Moreover, these are areas where effort is relatively clearly linked to results.

The absence of dominant, transformative goals suggests that young people are not planning major breakthroughs or changes. This behavior is typical of societies with heightened uncertainty: cautious plans replace ambitious ones.

Different Life Priorities for Men and Women

The topic of life goals was one of the few where differences between men and women proved to be statistically significant (Figure 12). It may seem surprising that men are more likely than women to aspire to starting a family, but this is what we found, and the statement holds true regardless of people's relationship status or marital status.

Figure 12. Gender Differences in Plans for the Next 3–5 Years



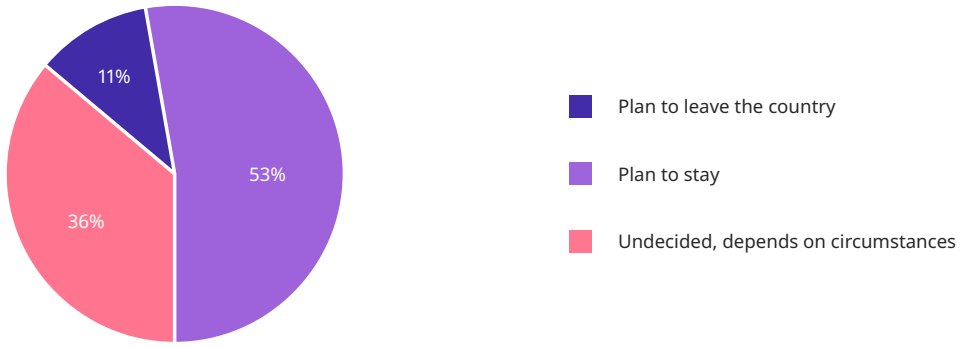
"What are your plans for the next 3–5 years?" %

The main finding from this section is that men and women do not differ in their basic life scenarios, but they prioritize different aspects within them. Men are more likely to focus on starting a family and launching their own business — that is, on outwardly expressed social roles and initiative. Women significantly more often prioritize health, education, personal development, and a more relaxed lifestyle. This does not automatically make their values and plans conflicting but rather shows different ways of strengthening their position and gaining a sense of stability amid uncertainty.

Emigration as a Fallback Plan

Migration sentiments among young people (Figure 13) do not indicate a mass intention to leave the country, but they do reveal that such an option exists as a persistent "fallback scenario."

Figure 13. Migration Plans for the Next 3–5 Years

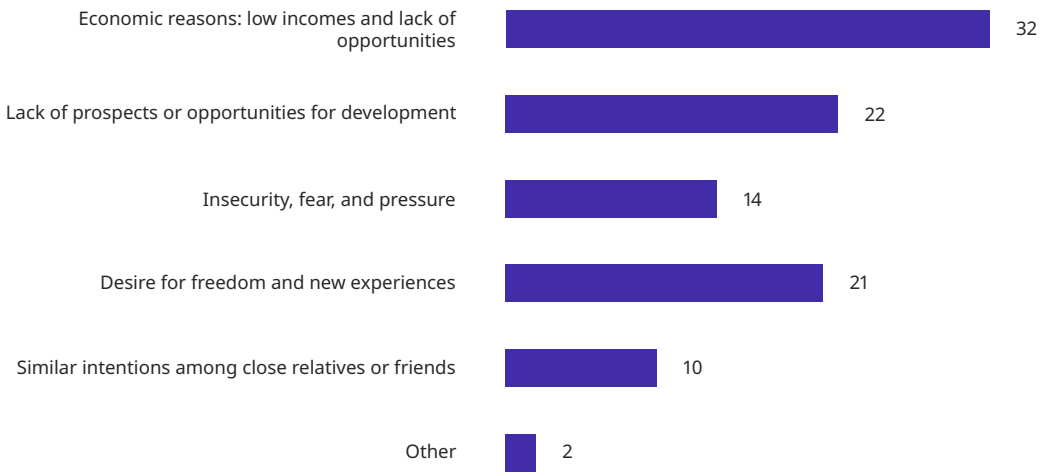


"Do you plan to leave the country in the next 3–5 years?" %

This data sends a mixed signal. On the one hand, we do not see a "mass exodus": only a minority express a firm intention to leave. On the other hand, if we combine those who want to leave with those who consider it a possibility, the total comes to nearly half of the sample. Thus, emigration is present as a plausible and legitimate scenario in the imagined future of a significant portion of young people interviewed.

The structure of motivations (Figure 14) confirms the rational nature of these attitudes. Economic reasons come first — low incomes and limited opportunities — followed by a lack of prospects for development, and a desire for greater freedom and new opportunities. Factors of insecurity and pressure are present but not dominant. In other words, potential mobility is explained not only by the political situation but also by a broader sense of external constraints.

Figure 14. Factors That Motivate Decisions to Emigrate

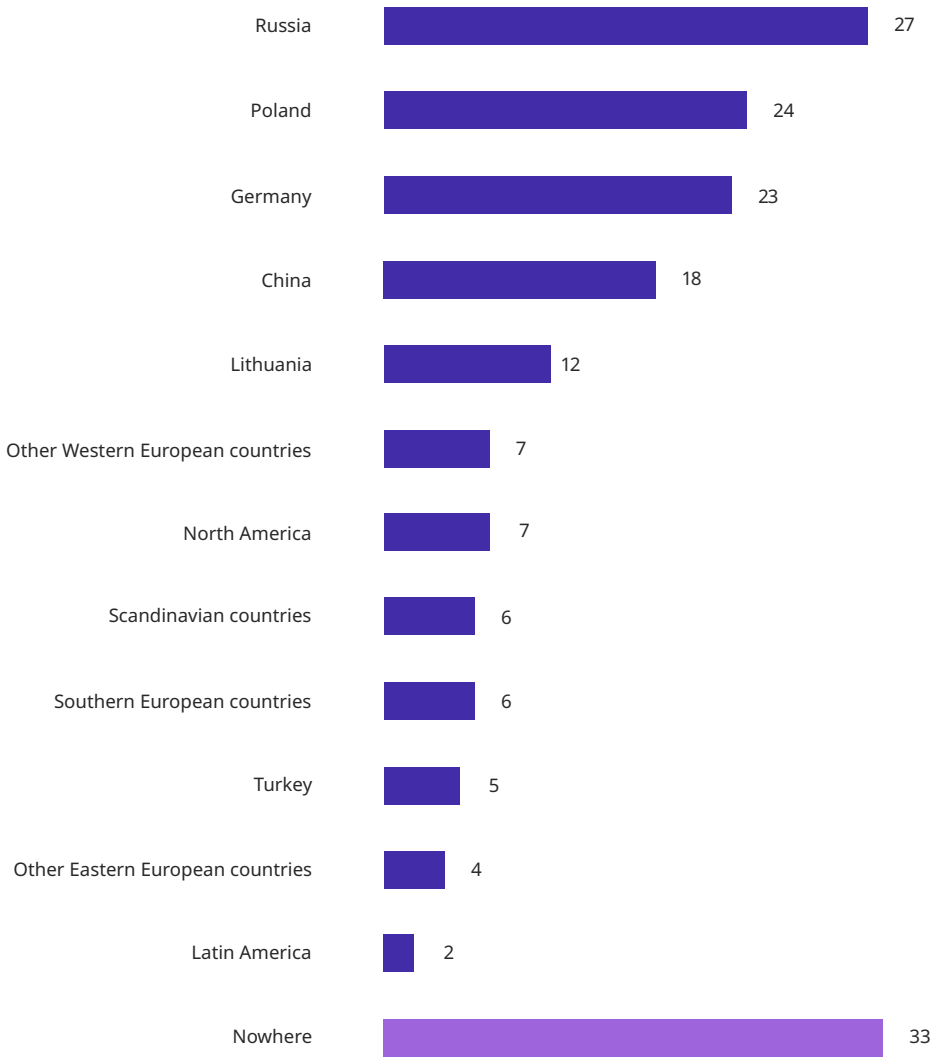


"If you have considered leaving, what is the main factor driving you toward this decision?" %

The choice of countries for a potential move does not follow any rigid geopolitical line (Figure 15). It is worth noting here that the question was not asked in the usual form, “To which country would you like to move?” but rather, “In your opinion, which countries are best for young people to move to?” This allowed us to study the perceptions of other countries, without ranking their accessibility for relocation. Perceptions can be shaped by stereotypes and ideas formed by the external environment, which is ultimately what interests us. The question was also answered by those who have no plans to emigrate. This group constitutes the largest share of the sample, so it is entirely natural that “nowhere” ranks first in terms of frequency of selection; many of these respondents, however, still gave a different answer.

The coexistence of Russia, Poland, Germany, China, and other destinations in the responses indicates that young people do not have a rigid geopolitical attachment. In public discourse, the Belarusian space is often described through the juxtaposition of opposing vectors; however, in the perception of young people, this does not take the form of an “either-or” choice. Different countries appear in parallel and do not exclude one another. At the same time, we cannot assert that a clear value-based position underlies every choice. These responses reflect, rather, perceptions of where it is “better” — and these perceptions can be shaped by personal connections, stories from acquaintances, the media narrative, and widespread stereotypes about income, freedom, or career opportunities.

Figure 15. Preferred Destination Countries for Young People



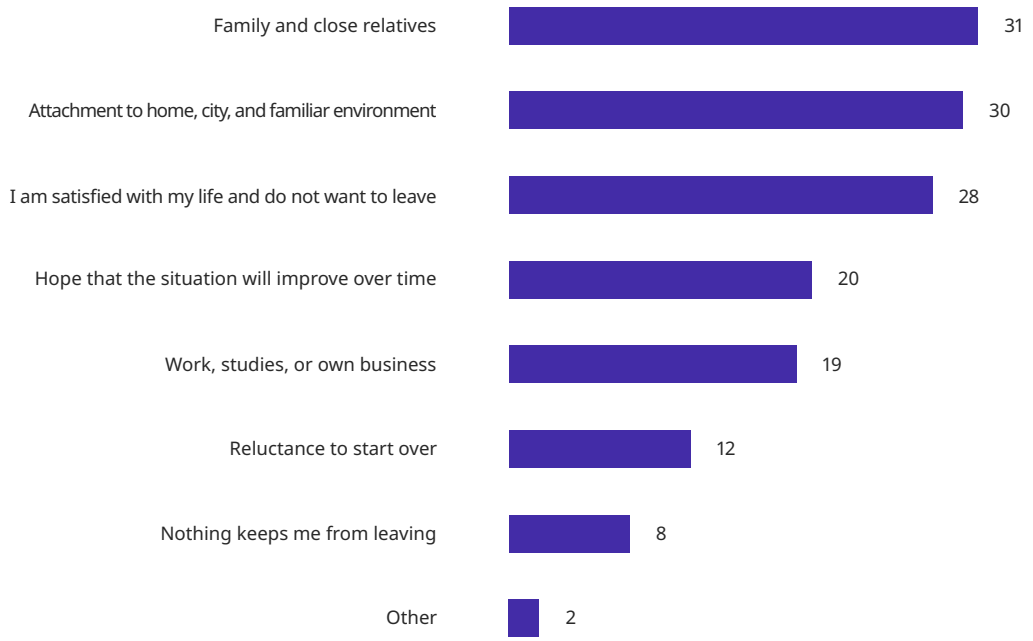
“In your opinion, which countries are the best for young people to move to?” %

This distribution suggests that young people's orientations are pragmatic in nature in so far as countries are perceived as offering different types of opportunities. When domestic growth constraints and regulatory uncertainty are felt within a country, the outside world begins to be seen as an alternative realm of opportunity. It is important to emphasize that pragmatism here does not exclude the influence of media images. Perceptions of the "land of opportunity" can be both instrumental and symbolic. Moreover, it is highly likely that the responses are based not so much on ideology as on the search for an environment where, in the respondents' view, efforts are more likely to yield results.

Everyday Life Prevents an Immediate Move

Next, it is important to understand why, despite a fairly high potential emigration, there has been no immediate outflow. The answer lies in the factors that keep people from leaving (Figure 16): family, loved ones, home, and the familiar environment act as anchors that are difficult to "transport" to another country. The factors most frequently cited are those that largely define our daily lives and are the hardest to give up.

Figure 16. Factors That Discourage Emigration



"What is keeping you from deciding to leave, or helping you to stay?" %

Overall, migration attitudes indicate that, for a significant portion of young people, moving to another country has become a normalized choice. This does not imply a mass intention to leave in the near future, even if nearly half of the respondents consider it a possibility in one way or another. This means that for many, the decision to "stay or leave" remains open and depends on their assessment of their prospects.

This pattern of responses indicates young people's sensitivity to the quality of opportunities within the country. As long as there is a sense of growth, predictability, and a connection between effort and outcomes, the alternative scenario remains on the back burner. If, on the other hand, these expectations are not met, the latent readiness for mobility can quickly transform into actual emigration. This is precisely why migration attitudes in this case serve as an indicator of confidence in the future, rather than merely a measure of geopolitical preferences.

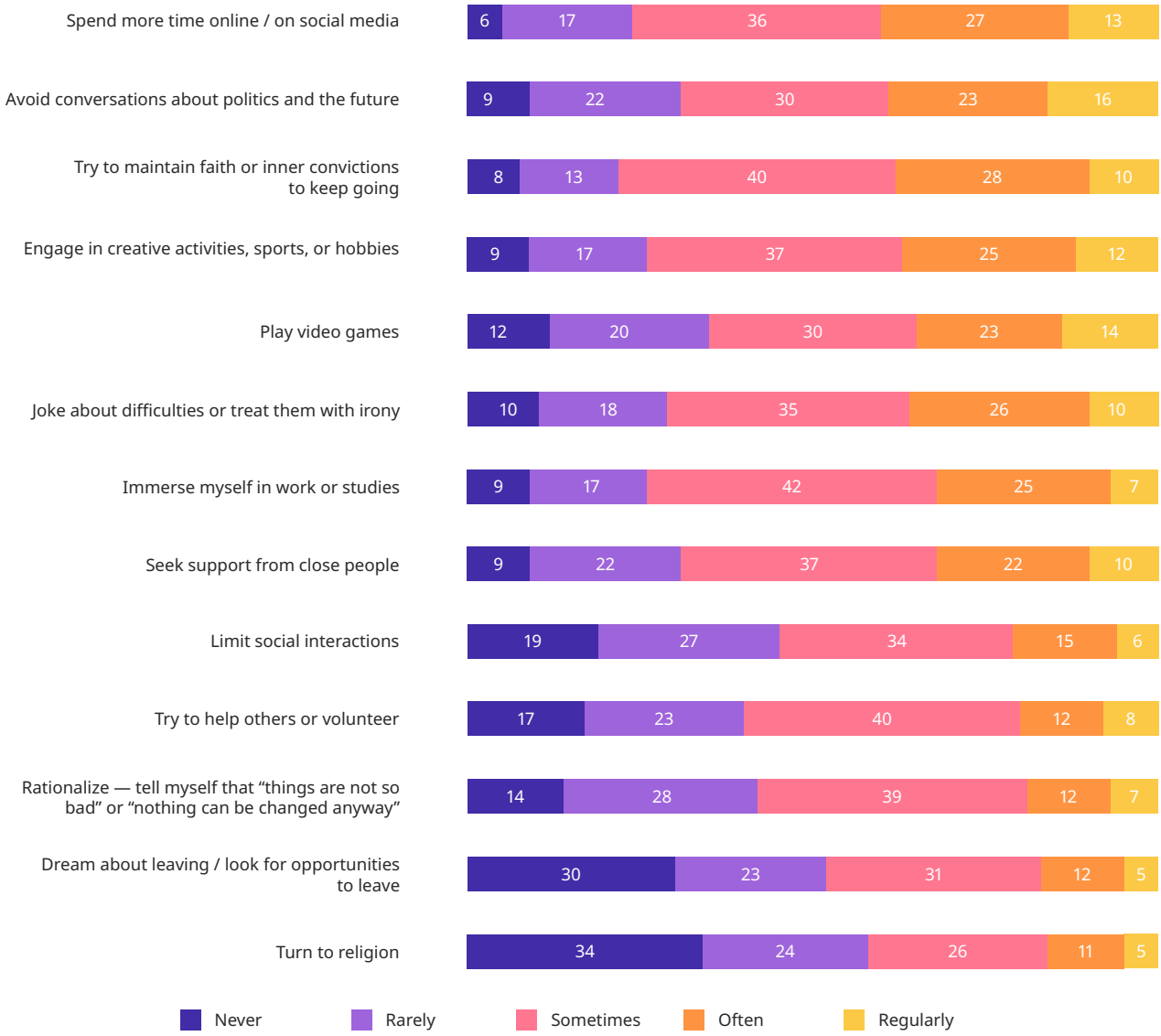
OUTCOME AS A GOAL: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE ACT AND ADAPT

In this section, we will explore the ways in which young people cope with problems, reduce anxiety, engage in civic activism, and generally navigate the uncertainty of the current situation. We will examine this by studying the behavioral strategies of young people. The same structural context can give rise to different modes of adaptation: from reduced engagement and retreat into everyday life, to the search for meaning and symbolic distance. The analysis in this section consequently shifts from what young people feel to how exactly they cope with it.

Coping Strategies: Simple and Accessible Ways to Reduce Stress

The distribution of responses shows (Figure 17) that young people use various methods to cope with stress, albeit no single method clearly dominates. Young people primarily choose the most accessible and simple ways to cope with stress. Turning to the internet, avoiding stressful conversations, and immersing themselves in work or hobbies are actions that are easy to implement without external support, risk, or major life changes. It is precisely this simplicity that makes them so widespread. These methods quickly reduce tension and allow young people to continue with their daily lives. At the same time, they do not always enhance a sense of control or change the situation. Their effect is short-term. However, in conditions of persistent uncertainty, choosing low-risk and easily applicable strategies seems rational, since the main task in such conditions is to maintain stability, not to radically transform the environment.

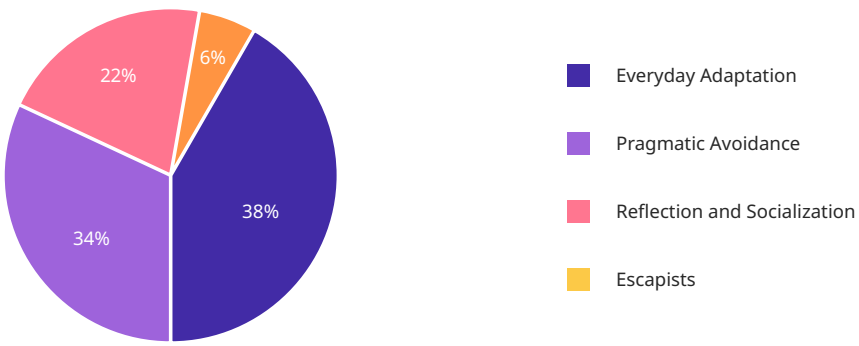
Figure 17. Frequency of Using Different Coping Strategies



"How often do you do the following to cope with difficulties or stress?" %

Factor and cluster analyses (Figure 18) show that young people respond to stress in different ways. Moreover, it is possible to identify several groups based on the consistent coping strategies individuals adopt, and to specify exactly which practices underlie each of them:

Figure 18. Adaptation Strategies



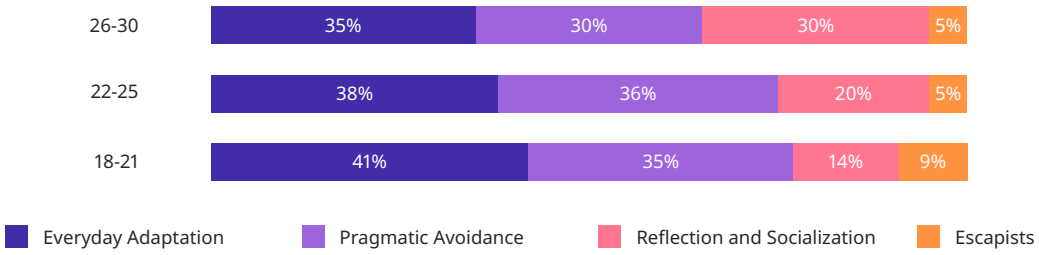
Everyday coping. This group uses simple and accessible ways to reduce stress: periodically turning to the internet and social media, immersing themselves in work or study, pursuing hobbies, and sticking to daily routines. At the same time, their avoidance of distressing topics and conversations about politics is not systematic, and their sources of social and meaningful support are weak. This is a strategy of simply continuing to function: people try to preserve their usual rhythm of life and compensate for stress through everyday activities, without developing any special defense mechanisms.

Pragmatic avoidance. This group is characterized by a conscious limitation of involvement in public life. At the behavioral level, this manifests as avoiding conversations about politics and the future, reducing social interaction, and exercising caution in speech and actions. Dreams of leaving are more common here, while social and meaningful support are sought less frequently; the primary focus is on minimizing risks. This is a strategy of self-restriction and narrowing the scope of interaction.

Reflection and socialization. This group relies on more resource-oriented ways of coping with uncertainty. It includes seeking support from loved ones, helping others, and volunteering, engaging in creative activities, as well as using irony as a way to maintain psychological distance. Withdrawal into the online world and avoidance of distressing topics are less common. People do not so much escape reality as they process it through relationships and reflection. This strategy is associated with lower anxiety levels and requires the presence of social and cultural resources.

Escapists. A small cluster is characterized by pronounced distancing from reality. Members of this group frequently retreat into the online world, video games, avoid discussing distressing topics, limit social interaction, and dream of leaving as a way to mentally escape the current situation. At the same time, social-meaningful support and ironic distancing are virtually absent. This is the most vulnerable adaptation model: tension is reduced through disengagement but not processed, which is associated with higher levels of anxiety.

Figure 19. Adaptation Strategies Across Age Groups



Age influences the distribution of coping strategies (Figure 19). Older respondents are more likely to exhibit more deliberate and consistent patterns, while extreme forms of coping become less common. Gender differences exist, but they are moderate and reflect different response styles rather than fundamentally different approaches. At the same time, subjective well-being shows almost no difference between groups, whereas anxiety levels vary significantly depending on the strategy.

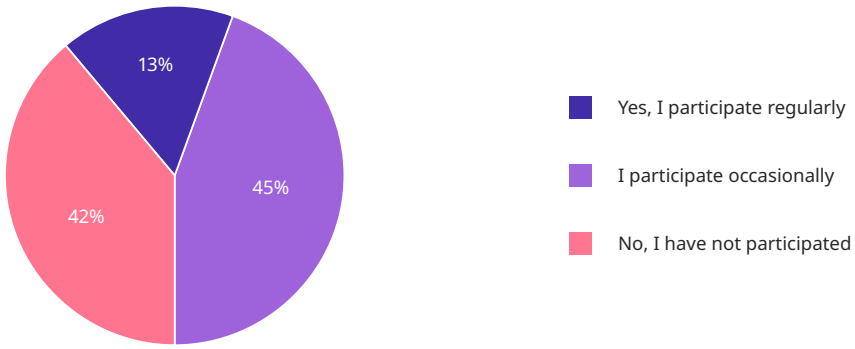
Overall, young people's adaptation is aimed at regulating their own state. The main task is to maintain stability under conditions of limited influence on the external environment. Differences between strategies show that the resources and methods for processing anxiety are unevenly distributed, and this is important to consider when analyzing further solutions and support needs.

Civic Participation is Risky and therefore not Active

Youth civic participation is most often sporadic. Many young people have experience participating, but for most it is not a regular practice (Figure 20). Activity manifests situationally and depends on specific circumstances.

This pattern of participation is characteristic of the entire sample. It is not concentrated in specific cities and does not automatically increase with age. This means that the issue is not one of differences between "active" and "passive" groups, but rather a broader context that sets the limits of what is possible and safe to do. Put differently, the environment influences the decision to participate more strongly than sociodemographic characteristics.

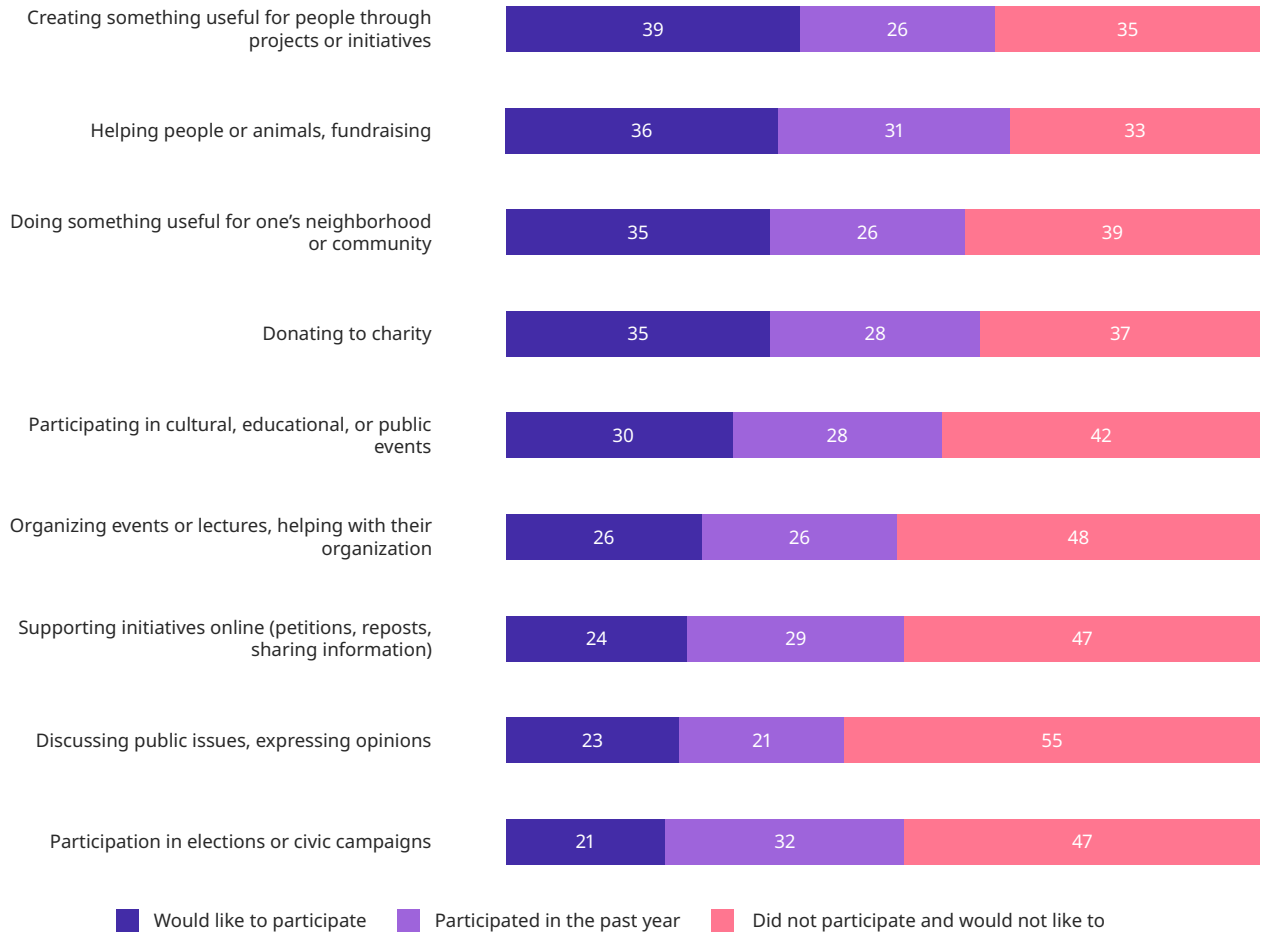
Figure 20. Frequency of Participation in Civic Activities



"Have you participated in any civic, volunteer, cultural, or educational initiatives (online or offline) over the past year?" %

When we look at the various forms of civic engagement (Figure 21), we do not see them coalescing into distinct, stable patterns of behavior; "cultural activists," "political activists," or "volunteers", for example, do not stand out as distinct, clearly differentiated groups. Instead, forms of engagement tend toward a single dimension: there are people who generally participate in public life, and there are those who are practically absent from it. In other words, the distinction lies not in the content of actions, but in the very fact of participation. Interest in participation persists, however, which means that the very idea of civic engagement remains socially acceptable and meaningful.

Figure 21. Forms of Civic Engagement: Actual and Desired Participation

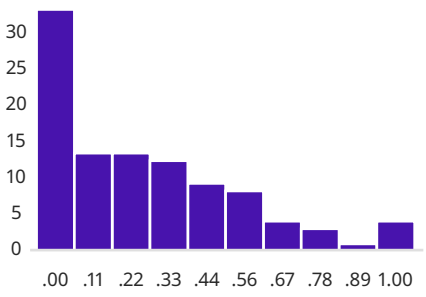


"Have you participated in any kind of civic or volunteer activity in the past year, or would you like to participate?" %

To get the full picture, we aggregated individual forms of activity into three indices: actual participation, interest in participation, and the gap between them. This approach allows us to move from describing individual practices to assessing the overall structure of engagement.

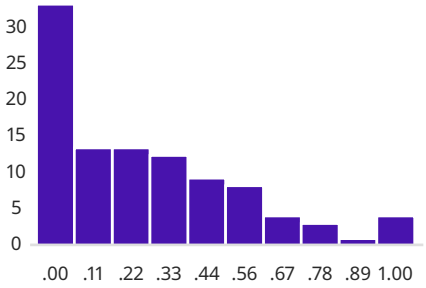
The Actual Participation Index (Figure 22) shows that for most young people, engagement remains at a low level and fragmented. The distribution of values is heavily skewed toward the lowest levels, though there is a small group with noticeably higher activity. This means that participation is not embedded in everyday norms. It is concentrated among a limited number of respondents and does not form a widespread pattern of behavior. This result aligns with the previous conclusion that forms of activity do not constitute different types of engagement: the key factor remains the very fact of presence or absence in the public sphere.

Figure 22. The Actual Participation Index



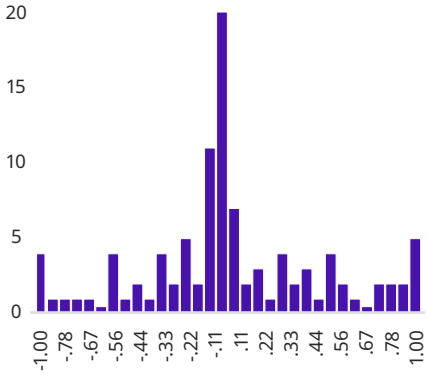
The Participation Interest Index (Figure 23) shows the extent to which young people are, in principle, willing to participate in public life, even if they do not currently do so. Its values are higher than those of the Actual Participation Index, indicating that the number who would like to participate is greater than the number of those who actually do so. In terms of distribution, both indices are similar: the majority has low values, while a small group has higher ones. That is, potential involvement is broader than actual involvement.

Figure 23. The Participation Interest Index



The Gap Between Desire and Participation Index (Figure 24). The average value of the gap index is close to zero, which is to say that it cannot be said that young people en masse want to participate in something but are unable to. However, the high variability indicates that the gap varies significantly from person to person. **For some respondents, desire and action coincide, while for others, they differ substantially**. On average, this evens out, but at the individual level, the differences can be significant. In other words, the problem is selective in nature. In some segments and for certain forms of activity, barriers are almost imperceptible, while in others they significantly limit the transition from interest to action. In other words, we are dealing with an uneven distribution of opportunities. It is precisely this heterogeneity that shapes the current structure of civic engagement.

Figure 24. The Gap Between Desire and Participation Index



Thus, all three indices allow us to draw a couple of conclusions:

1. There is a general interest in participation. Low engagement cannot be explained by a lack of demand or a loss of value in civic activity.
2. The data do not support the idea of a complete ban or total blockage. On average across the sample, the gap between desire and action does not appear especially large, which means that the space for participation formally remains intact.

An analysis of forms of activity allows us to identify three “zones” of civic activity, differing in terms of openness and perceived safety. The first zone consists of those forms of engagement that are perceived as **safe and socially acceptable**. Helping people and animals, charity, and useful projects do not require a public stance and are not associated with risk. Therefore, both interest and actual participation coincide here. This is a space where a person can act without serious consequences and, indeed, why such practices have become the core of civic engagement.

The second zone is the zone of **latent participation**. It shows that interest in more “public” forms of activity (elections, public campaigns, cultural and local initiatives) exists, but it is not always realized. People are, in principle, ready to participate, but they assess the risks, the transparency of procedures, and the expected outcome. If conditions seem uncertain or do not guarantee results, interest does not translate into action. This indicates the presence of barriers, not a lack of motivation.

The third zone demonstrates forms of activity that are **almost entirely excluded**. Here there is not only low participation but also weak interest. These include public statements, discussions of injustice, and organizational activity. Such actions are perceived as potentially confrontational and risky.

What exactly motivates people to participate in civic activities? The structure of motivations (Figure 25) shows that a concrete and visible result is the decisive condition for the transition from interest to action. Motives associated with tangible changes and real benefits for people elicit the strongest response. A focus on practical and understandable benefits proves to be the only consistent factor that bridges the gap between desire and action.

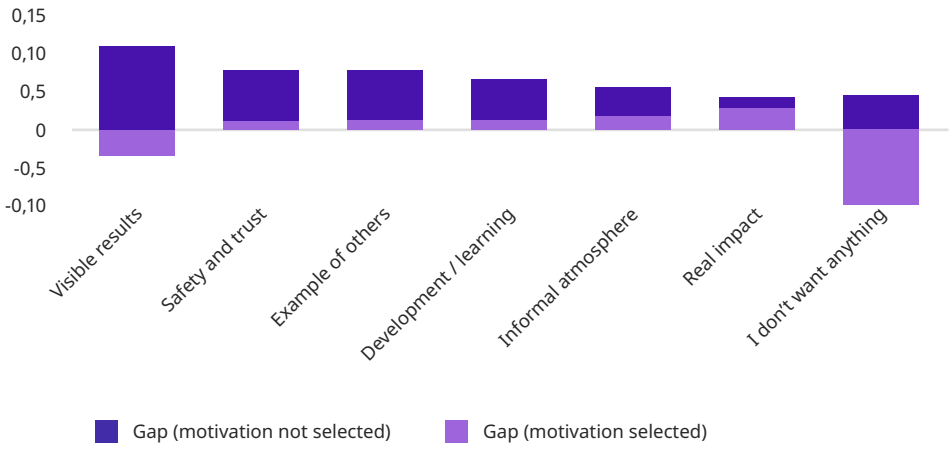
Figure 25. What Would Help Young People Feel More Confidence and Stability in Life

"What would help you to feel more confident and secure in your life?" %

Other factors — such as a supportive atmosphere, opportunities for growth, safety, trust, and the example set by others — increase interest in participation but do not automatically translate that interest into action. They create a favorable backdrop and increase readiness, but do not in themselves remove the barriers to inclusion.

In the next stage, the analysis focused on which motivational conditions reduce or, conversely, widen the gap between interest in participation and actual involvement (Figure 26). The Index of the Gap between Desire and Participation was used as the dependent variable. For each motive, the average gap values were compared between those who indicated it and those who did not.

Figure 26. How Motivations Affect the Gap Between Interest and Participation



If the gap widens, that is because desire to engage is growing faster than actual engagement. If the gap narrows, interest is more easily converted into action. If the gap is negative, the person is generally uninterested in participating and does not do so.

A focus on visible results is associated with the greatest increase in the gap. Those for whom a measurable effect is fundamentally important are more likely to express interest in participating, but they cannot find formats that give them a sense of real change. The desire is there, but there is no trust in the effectiveness of the tools.

Motivations related to safety, trust, the example of others, and opportunities for development work in a similar way. They increase willingness to participate but do not ensure a corresponding increase in activity. This means that people consider these conditions important but do not see them realized in available initiatives. As a result, interest grows but participation remains limited.

Consequently, an engagement strategy should not be built around value statements or a comfortable environment per se, but around demonstrating clear, measurable, and locally tangible results.

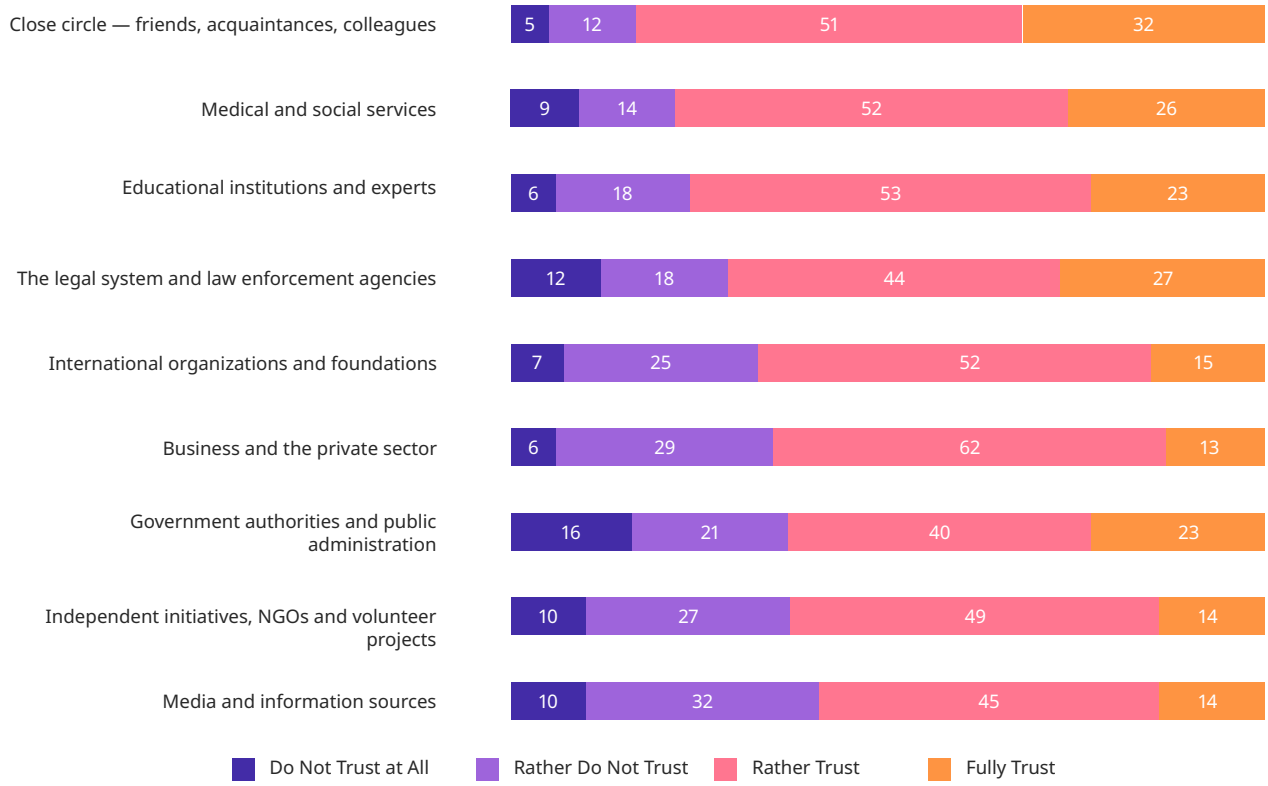
Willingness to Act is Determined by the Availability of Real Opportunities

Up to this point, the analysis has focused on how young people perceive reality, what coping strategies they choose, and in what forms their civic engagement manifests itself. However, the willingness to act depends not only on attitudes and motivation. It also relies on the available environment — on the social, institutional, and professional support that make participation possible, meaningful, and safe. It is therefore important to examine the infrastructure of opportunities: Where do young people see resources? Whom do they trust? Which channels of inclusion do they perceive as effective?

Trust in People and Institutions is Quite High

The structure of trust sets the basic framework for inclusion. The data show that trust is distributed unevenly and is concentrated primarily within one's immediate circle — among friends, acquaintances, and colleagues. Accordingly, horizontal connections remain a key source of social support. In times of uncertainty, it is personal networks that provide a sense of security and reduce the risks of interaction.

Figure 27. Level of Trust in Social Environment and Institutions



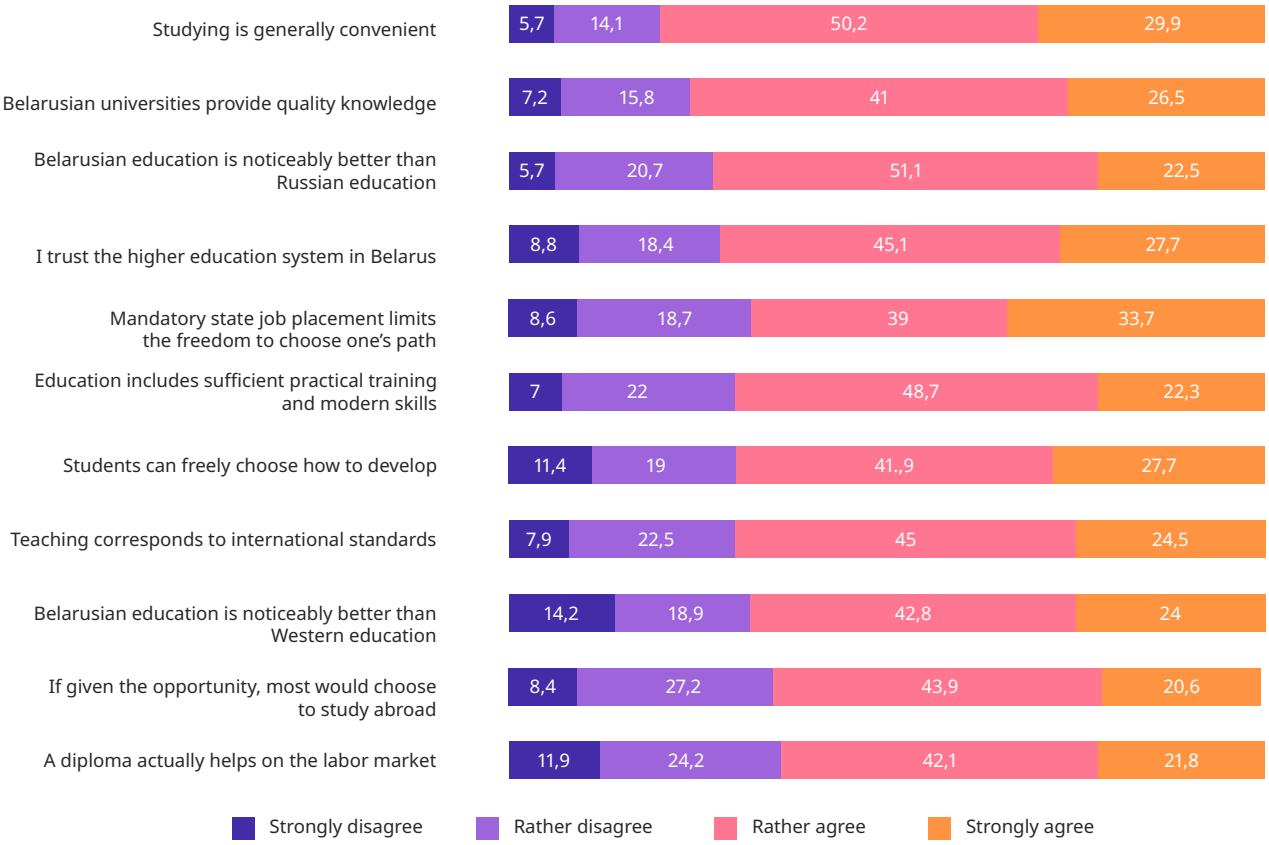
"How much do you trust the following institutions or groups in general?" %

Relatively stable trust persists in professional institutions — educational institutions, medical services, and social services. Their legitimacy is based on their everyday usefulness and practical interactions. At the same time, attitudes toward government bodies, the media, and a number of public actors are more reserved and distant. Thus, the infrastructure of inclusion is formed not around the institutional system as a whole, but around personal and professional networks. This explains why participation more often takes non-public and local forms, and why it relies on horizontal connections rather than vertical structures.

Education is a Functional Resource

Education is the next key element of the infrastructure of opportunities. Assessments of higher education (Figure 28) show that it is perceived primarily as a functional resource. The focus is on the quality of knowledge, the availability of practical experience, alignment with labor market demands, and the impact of a degree on career prospects. Education is evaluated based on its practical impact — whether it helps to secure a job, expand opportunities, and enhance stability in the labor market.

Figure 28. Perceptions of the Quality and Role of Higher Education in Belarus



"To what extent do you agree with the following statements about higher education in Belarus?" %

At the same time, there is a sensitivity to restrictions on personal autonomy, particularly to mandatory "service obligations," as well as a willingness to consider studying abroad as an alternative. This indicates that the value of education is not tied to the symbolic status of the system as such. The criteria young people value are effectiveness and freedom of future choice.

Thus, education retains high significance, but its role is interpreted pragmatically. It is viewed not as a guarantee or an element of status or prestige, but as a tool for personal growth in conditions of uncertainty. Following this logic, education is incorporated into an individual strategy for strengthening one's own position, rather than relying on systemic support.

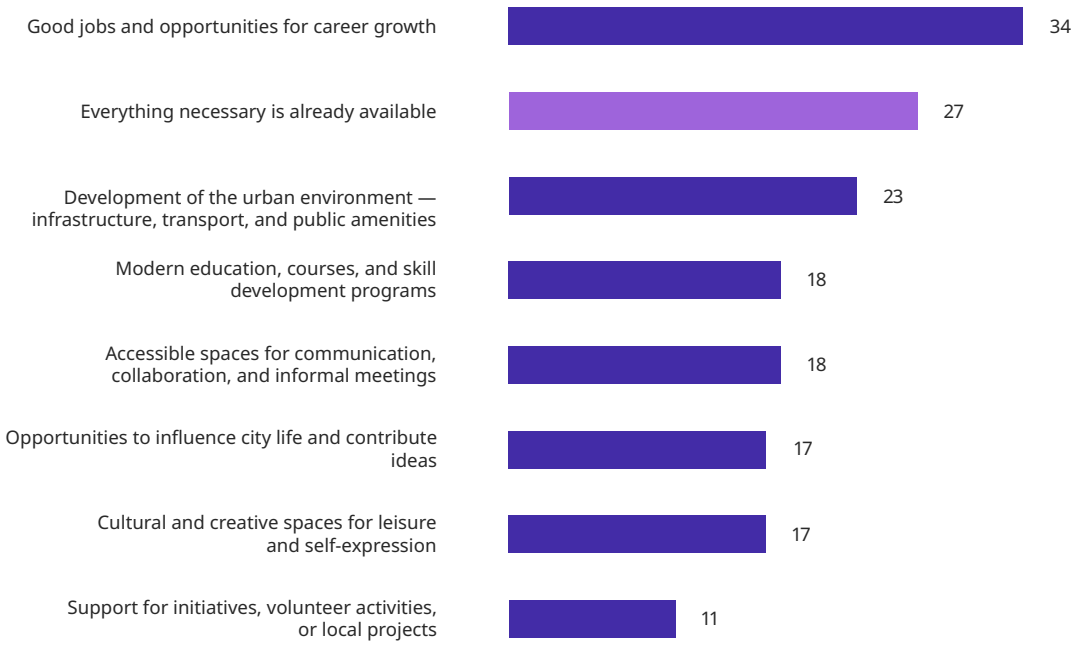
If education is viewed as a significant personal resource, the next question is to what extent the urban environment allows this (and other) resources to be realized. The data show that the most frequently mentioned shortfall relates to good jobs and career advancement opportunities. At the same time, a significant portion of respondents believe that "everything necessary is available," which does not suggest a total lack of opportunities.

It is important to emphasize that our study identifies the need itself, but it does not explain its causes. Based on this data, we cannot assert whether this is related to the state of the labor market, the city's economic structure, the level of competition, or other factors. We can only state that for a significant portion of young people, professional fulfilment is perceived as an area of limitations.

Multifaceted Infrastructure Needs

Surveys of the urban environment (Figure 29) show that young people view the infrastructure of opportunities as multifaceted. Economic stability — good jobs and prospects for growth — remains a top priority in the urban environment, though the picture does not end there. Modern education, spaces for socializing and collaboration, urban development, and the opportunity to influence city life are also important. This indicates that young people's focus is not only on income, but they also desire a holistic environment in which efforts can translate into results.

Figure 29. Expectations of the Urban Environment (What Is Missing in Your City)

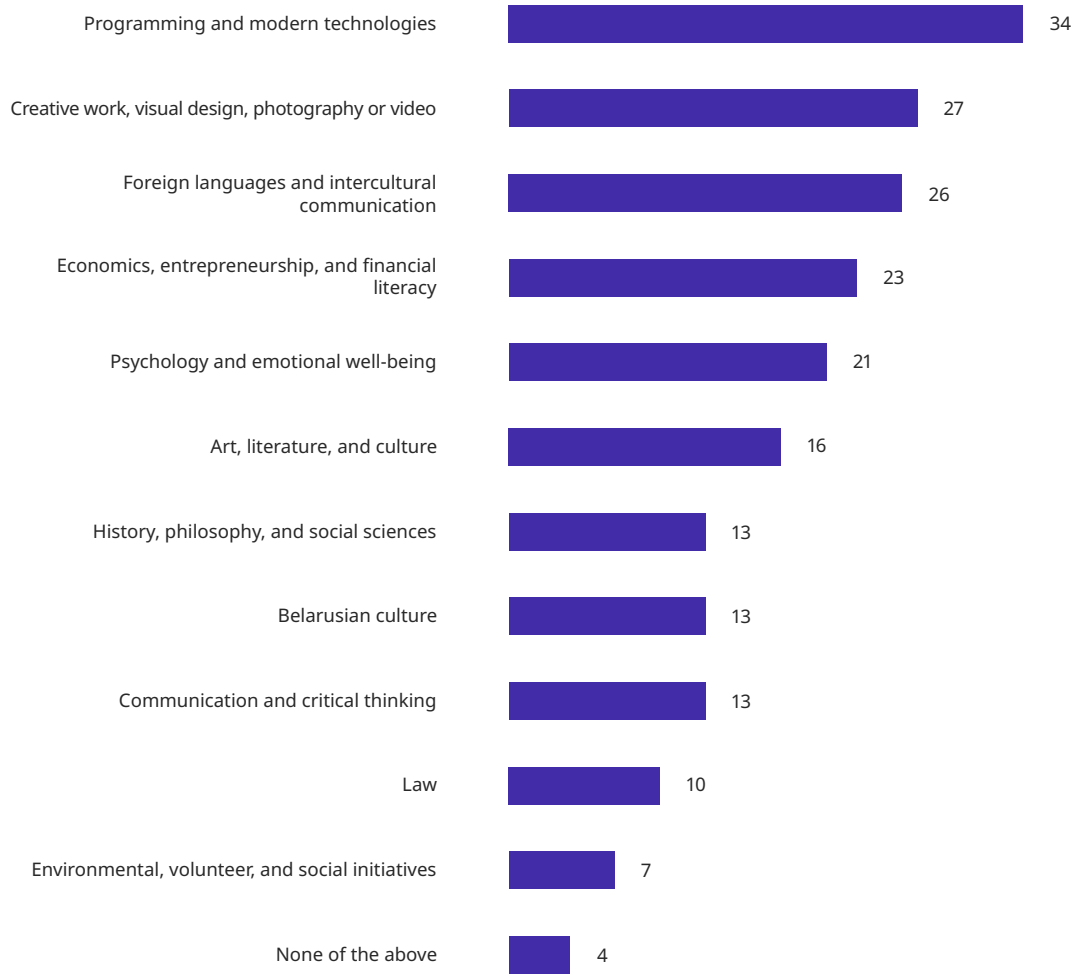


"In your opinion, what opportunities are lacking in your city?" %

The issue of work and career growth involves more than the economic component. When young people speak of a lack of jobs, career prospects, modern training programs, or spaces for development and initiative, they are also speaking to the mismatch between their willingness to invest in themselves and the limited number of real opportunities to put those efforts into practice. The knowledge and skills acquired imply a continuation of this trajectory, but the local environment does not always provide enough opportunities for growth. A gap emerges between preparation and implementation.

In addition to the topic of educational needs, we asked which subjects interested respondents the most (Figure 30). In first place are programming, modern technologies, and digital literacy. Next come creative fields, foreign languages, and economic knowledge. These subjects are united by their practical focus: they are linked to professional mobility, the ability to work remotely and adapt to changing conditions, and, of course, high incomes.

Figure 30. Topics of Interest



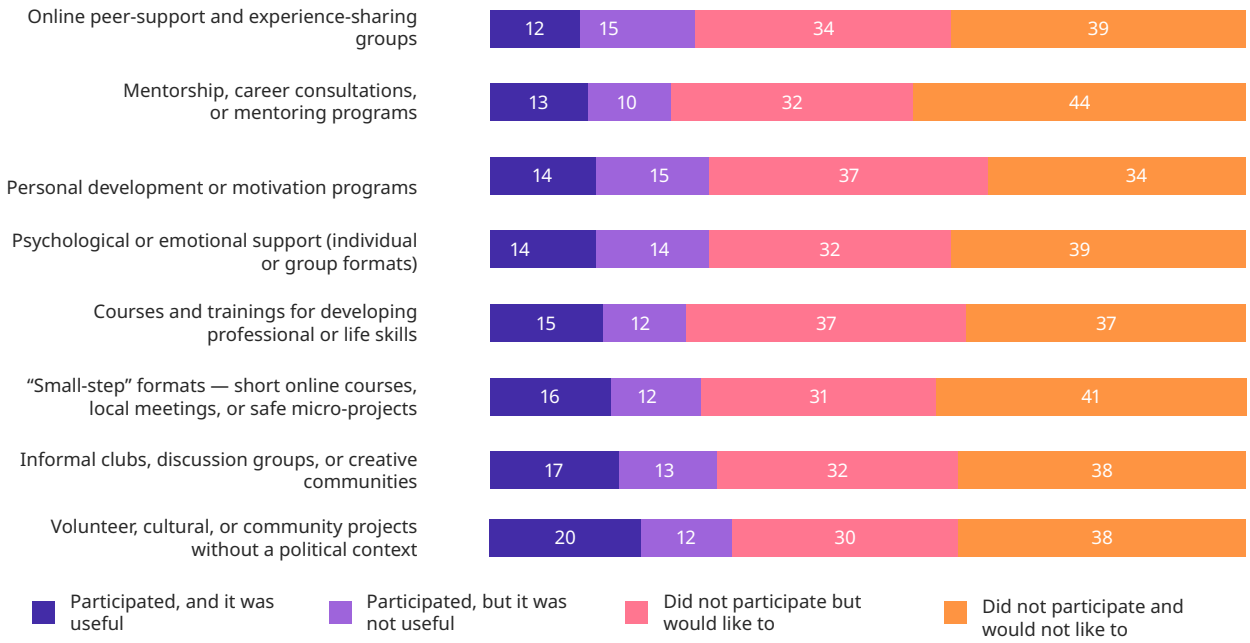
"Which topics do you currently find most interesting for learning or self-development?" %

Subjects related to psychological support rank somewhere in the middle. They are important, but they are not the priority for young people in education. Humanities and cultural disciplines also rank in the middle of the list.

The least in demand are law, environmental issues, and volunteer initiatives, which is entirely consistent with the fact that civic engagement is currently perceived as risky, and the fact that people are mainly focused on meeting personal needs unrelated to socially significant activities.

An analysis of training and support formats shows (Figure 31) that the main problem lies not in a lack of interest, but in a persistent gap between interest and actual participation, as is the case with civic participation, though here the overall level of interest is much higher. On average, young people express interest in several support formats simultaneously, yet they only participate about half as often. This indicates the presence of a significant latent demand: the willingness to participate exists, but it is not consistently realized.

Figure 31.Potential and Actual Participation in Educational Formats

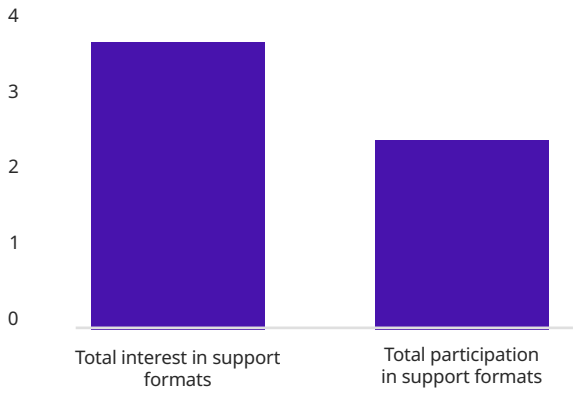


"If you have participated in the following support programs, which ones would you describe as useful? If you have not, would you be interested in participating in them?" %

As well, the assessment of the usefulness of existing formats remains moderate. This suggests that the barrier lies not only in access but also in perception. Formats may be visible and even potentially attractive, but they are not perceived as sufficiently relevant, convenient, or effective. The gap, then, arises not at the level of interest per se, but at the level of trust in the format and the conditions for its implementation.

The "interest × participation" matrix (Figure 33) helps to understand the structure of this gap. It shows that there is a group of young people whose desire to participate and their actual participation coincide. This means that they find the formats understandable, accessible, and reliable enough to get involved in them. For them, the infrastructure works and the desire is converted into action.

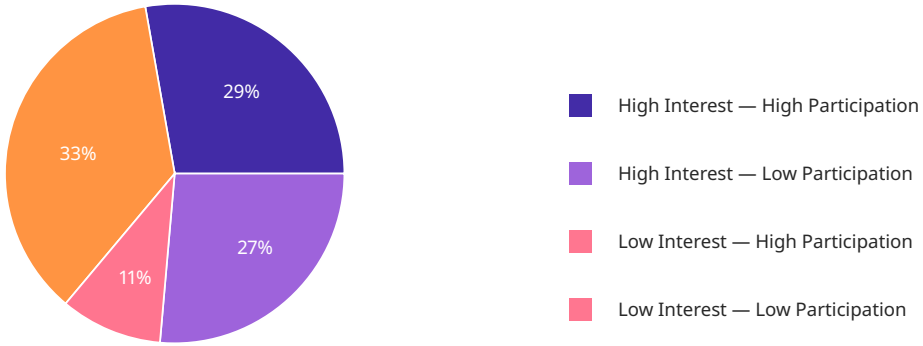
Figure 32. Declared Interest and Actual Engagement



"Have you participated in any kind of civic or volunteer activity in the past year, or would you like to participate?" %

Survey question (q25): "Have you participated in any kind of civic or volunteer activity in the past year, or would you like to participate?"

Figure 33. Distribution of Respondents by Interest–Participation Zones



But a significant proportion of respondents are in a different position—they are interested in participating, but do not do so. This is the gap zone. People are neither indifferent nor passive, yet something prevents them from taking action. The reasons may vary: an excess of options and "information overload", making it difficult to choose; formats that require time or public exposure; the feeling that participation will not yield tangible results; or doubts about the organizers' reliability. And, of course, we must not forget that declared interest does not always match reality. For example, it may be socially acceptable or even socially dictated, but not personally embraced.

In this respect, the problem lies primarily not in a lack of motivation, but in the mismatch between the logic of young people's daily lives and the way the proposed formats are structured. It is precisely this mismatch that creates a persistent gap between interest and participation.

A separate group is characterized by both low interest and low participation. The gap here is less pronounced, but the potential for engagement is also lower. For such respondents, participation is possible only with minimal effort and a low level of publicity. This aligns well with the previously identified preference for "safe" and local forms of activity.

The breakdown by specific formats confirms the overall conclusion. In almost all categories, the proportion of those who would like to participate exceeds the proportion actually participating. The gap is particularly noticeable in the formats of psychological support, mentoring, mutual aid groups, and "small steps." Even relatively neutral volunteer and community projects do not fully remove the barriers to inclusion. This means that the "safe" nature of a format alone does not guarantee its conversion into action.

Overall, the results reveal a structural nature to the gap between demand and implementation. Young people demonstrate a willingness to learn, receive support, and develop, yet the infrastructure of these formats does not ensure a sustainable transition from interest to participation. This is directly linked to previous findings regarding the selectivity of trust, the localization of control, and a focus on concrete results. If a format is perceived as understandable, safe, and practically useful, participation increases.

Consequently, the key challenge for educational and support initiatives lies not in creating demand, but in designing formats that bridge the gap between intention and action. This involves lowering the barrier to entry, increasing the transparency of results, and embedding initiatives within familiar communication and social contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings show that Belarusian youth live in conditions where they possess limited agency, yet retain the ability to adapt, plan, and seek opportunities. This situation should not be interpreted as complete apathy from young people or their refusal to participate in public life. Rather, it involves a restructuring of forms of participation and life strategies to adapt to conditions of heightened uncertainty and risk.

In the context of Belarus's socio-political life, it is most important to focus on several key conclusions.

First, young people's civic potential has not disappeared. The realization of that potential is, though, shifting from the public and institutional spheres to safer and more localized formats. Young people are willing to participate in initiatives if they have concrete and understandable outcomes, do not require high visibility, and are perceived to be low risk. Civic engagement is therefore gradually taking on a more horizontal and practice-oriented character.

Second, young people's political and value orientations remain flexible and ambiguous. The absence of rigid geopolitical polarization and the desire to combine different value orientations point to a pragmatic approach to the country's future. Young people do not seek ideological confrontations. Instead, they look for development models capable of simultaneously ensuring stability and allowing the possibility of change.

Third, migration attitudes serve as an indicator of the quality of domestic opportunities. The potential willingness of a significant portion of young people to consider moving means that the stability of society depends to a large extent on the domestic environment's ability to offer clear development prospects and social mobility. As long as there is a sense of growth and a connection between effort and reward, many are willing to stay and build a life within the country.

Finally, the results show that the infrastructure of opportunities — access to education, professional growth, social initiatives, and horizontal forms of cooperation — is becoming a key factor in social stability. It is precisely in these areas that a space is formed in which young people can engage in activities and feel a sense of their own significance.

Thus, Belarusian youth remain eager to participate in public life, but their level of engagement depends on the extent to which the social and institutional environment allows individual efforts to translate into tangible results. Whether this connection strengthens or weakens will largely determine the future of the country's socio-political dynamics.

AUTHOR

Darya Urban

Research Lead at the Center for New Ideas, sociologist. She holds a Master's degree in Sociology from the Belarusian State University and has over 10 years of experience in applied research. Since 2012, she has been engaged in social, economic, and political studies, including participation in international research projects in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), UNFPA, EBRD, USAID, and other organisations.

urban@newideas.center

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Acknowledgements

The author expresses her gratitude to everyone who contributed to the data collection and processing for this study, as well as to Anton Radniankou and Ryhor Astapenia for their valuable comments and support in writing the report.

Co-funded by the European Union