

PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN A LOCAL CONTEXT  
A CASE STUDY OF BELARUS

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present research makes several noteworthy contributions to the theme of perspectives on human rights in a local context by examining the case of Belarus. Its major objective is to examine the interrelation between the repressive human rights practices in Belarus and Belarusians' attitudes toward human rights, the regime and human rights violations in their country. In particular, this thesis provides findings concerning Belarusians' values, mentality and human rights thinking, as well as their level of satisfaction with the political and economic situation in their country and their readiness to stand up for their rights. These findings contribute to extending our knowledge on why president Lukashenka maintains his grip on power despite systemic human rights violations in the country. To advance a better understanding of this issue, the paper applies central concepts from various approaches on human rights, such as universalism versus relativism, individualism versus collectivism, ideology and the social contract theory. The largest part of the material used for this thesis is qualitative interview data, gathered through fieldwork in Belarus in July 2018. Secondary data analysis has been used to validate the research results. The main findings indicate that there exists a correlation between Belarusians' perspectives on human rights and the regime's repressive human rights practices in the country. This research provides evidence, which suggests that human rights related relativism is still entrenched in Belarusian society. Collective values, alternative interpretation of human rights, a gap in the knowledge on human rights and prioritizing stability and security rather than civil liberties explain why the human rights situation in Belarus remains unchanged. The empirical findings in this study can serve as a contribution to the debate on human rights perspectives in a local context, and as a base for future studies of the regime, the state of democracy and human rights in Belarus.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The choice of the topic and the research question

This thesis attempts to investigate the theme of human rights in Belarus, addressing the relationship between the regime's resilience and the population's attitudes toward human rights. A background for choosing this topic is my personal interest in the theme of human rights in authoritarian states and in Belarus in particular, as a case of Belarus represents an enigma of a durable well-functioning authoritarian state known for its repressive human rights practices (Frear, 2019).

Though academics in the West have shown less interest in Belarus in comparison to Russia and Ukraine over the past two decades, there exist a number of publications dedicated to President Lukashenka and his politics. This literature seeks to explain why Belarus remains an authoritarian state by examining the obvious paradoxes of the political system in the country. These paradoxes include popular support but restricted civil liberties, economic growth but absence of marked reforms, a defense of state sovereignty but suppressing Belarusian nationalism and closer integration with Russia, but affirmations of "Europeanness" (Frear, 2019:1). The Western media and politicians have frequently defined Belarus under president Lukashenka as "Europe's last dictatorship" and "the outpost of tyranny", while academics have described the regime as totalitarian, neo-communist, retro-utopian and demagogical democracy (Frear, 2019). Thus, the question arises about the sources and the durability of this successful authoritarianism. To address this issue, this research seeks to investigate the Belarusian population's perspectives on human rights, their values and attitudes toward the regime as well as human rights violations in the country. The key research question of this study is therefore: How do Belarusians' values, human rights thinking and attitudes to the regime correlate with repressive human rights practices in Belarus? To delineate the key research question, this study seeks to address the following sub-questions:

- Whether or not Belarusians' values, mentality and human rights thinking are in conformity with the universality of human rights?
- Whether or not Belarusians are satisfied with the political and economic situation in their country?
- Whether or not Belarusians are ready to stand up for their rights?

The purpose of the first sub-question is to find out whether Belarusians' values and human rights attitudes are based on the universality or the relativity of human rights. To answer this question, this thesis investigates whether the Belarusian population still has collective values inherited from the USSR and whether its opinion is founded on the ideology of the Belarusian state. The purpose of the second sub-question is to find out whether order, security and stability are of a higher priority for Belarusians than the respect of human rights. The third sub-question explores the level of readiness among Belarusians to stand up for their rights. As "stand up for" is defined as "speak and act in support of" (English Oxford Living Dictionaries), standing up for one's rights in this case means a participation in protests and demonstrations against the regime. To investigate the second and the third sub-questions, this thesis examines the social contract system in Belarus.

As this thesis explores the area of the population's human rights attitudes, it can make an original contribution to the field of human rights understanding in a local context. Moreover, a case of Belarus as an authoritarian state arouses curiosity and represents an important area in the study of repressive regimes (Balmaceda, 2007). Therefore, this study can contribute to advancing our knowledge on sources of authoritarianism and the durability of autocratic regimes (Balmaceda, 2007). This explains the relevance and significance of the research questions. However, the scope of the research questions is limited in two ways. First, due to practical constraints, this study cannot provide a comprehensive review of the population's attitudes to all human rights. Thus, this thesis examines the population's opinion on the human rights situation in their country putting more focus on selected rights infringed in Belarus, which are freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, workers' rights and forced labor issues. Overall, this research puts greater emphasis on civil rights, as Belarus has a poor record on this category of rights, in comparison to socio-economic rights (UN, 2017). Second, there are boundaries in terms of time, within which the research is confined and all the extrapolations are limited to the 2013-2018 time frame.

The expectations for the research remain mostly unclear. However, there exists a vague idea of what the findings might be. As several publications on Belarus mention the population's support for the regime (Balmaceda, 2007, Bekus 2010, Wilson 2011 and Frear, 2019), despite systemic abuse of human rights (UN, 2017), one may suppose that Belarusians are most likely satisfied with the status quo and are not concerned with civil liberties as long as they enjoy stability in the country. However, as the economic situation in Belarus is deteriorating, there

might be a mood for anti-regime protests. The unemployment tax demonstrations in 2017 indicated that Belarusians are able stand up for their rights (Viasna, 2018). Additionally, Belarusians might still have collectivist values, as Belarus preserved the elements of the Soviet ideology and structure (Bekus, 2010).

## **1.2 The structure of the thesis**

The overall structure of this thesis takes the form of six chapters, including the introductory chapter. Chapter 2 deals with the theoretical framework of the thesis, where I examine various theoretical approaches within the concept of human rights. First, I investigate the theories of relativism versus universalism, where concepts of collectivism and individualism are central. Further, I examine the concept of ideology and the social contract theory. Chapter 3 gives an account on methodology used to conduct the research, where I discuss the reasons for its choice and the process of data collection. The methodology chosen for this research is a mixed method: a combination of qualitative interview research, analysis of secondary quantitative data and text analysis, where the priority is given to qualitative research. The fourth chapter is a background chapter which is concerned with the human rights situation in Belarus, where I present a short history of Belarus and a review of the state of specific rights in the country. The fifth chapter presents the findings of the research and the discussion, where I analyze and discuss my empirical findings related to interviewees' values, human rights attitudes and the social contract issues and compare them to the secondary research. The final sixth chapter draws upon the entire thesis, provides the answer to the research question and presents a brief review of limitations and contributions of the research. Additionally, it includes a discussion of the implications of the findings to future research into this area.

## **2. THEORY**

The purpose of this chapter is to review various academic approaches within the concept of human rights, which compose a theoretical framework for this thesis. As mentioned earlier, one of the purposes of this thesis is to investigate what attitudes Belarusians have toward human rights, the regime and the human rights situation in the country. To address this issue, this chapter gives an overview of the following theories: universalism versus relativism (1), individualism versus collectivism (2), the concept of ideology, which includes definitions of the concept and examining the ideology of liberalism versus communism and socialism (3).

Finally, it examines the social contract theory (4).

## **2.1 The definitions of human rights**

Although it is impossible to single out the most accurate definition of “human rights” in scholarly publications, there is a universal agreement about human rights appealing to guarantee the demand and enjoyment of an appropriate life quality and freedom from arbitrary unlawful interference, as well as equal protection of the law, and the realization of basic cultural, economic and social needs (Haas, 2014). According to Forsythe (2012:3),

Human rights are widely considered to be those fundamental moral rights of the person that are necessary for a life with human dignity. Human rights are thus means to a greater social end, and it is a legal system that tells us at any given point in time which rights are considered most fundamental in society.

Donnelley (2013:17) defines human rights as

The minimum set of goals, services, opportunities and protections that are widely recognized today as essential prerequisites for the life of dignity and particular set of practices to realize those goals, services, opportunities, and protections.

Black’s Law Dictionary gives the following definition of the term: “The freedoms, immunities, and benefits that, according to modern values (esp. at an international level), all human beings should be able to claim as a matter of right in the society in which they live” (Garner, 1999 in Høstmælingen, 2013:34).

Accordingly, human rights are rights belonging to all human beings and are consequently equal and inalienable rights; one cannot stop being human, no matter how badly one behaves or how barbarously one is treated. In addition, human rights is a standard of political legitimacy, in sense that the governments safeguard these rights (Donnelley, 2013:10-12).



## **2.2 Academic approaches on human rights**

The concept of human rights has been widely discussed in literature since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human rights in 1948. The “field” of human rights comprises a number of disciplines and cross-disciplinary approaches, which include law, politics, philosophy, ethics, sociology, anthropology, history and political science (Swanson Goldberg and Schultheis Moor, 2012). “Some literature seeks to explain the philosophical traditions and historical forces within the field of human rights as well as to identify the variety of human rights” (Haas, 2014:2).

Haas (2014) discusses, for instance, philosophical origins of human rights, metaphilosophical justifications for human rights and metaphilosophical opponents of human rights, among which one can find the theories of universalism versus relativism, individualism versus collectivism and the social contract theory.

### **2.2.1 Universalism and cultural relativism**

Universalism versus cultural relativism has been one of the most debated topics within the theory of international law and human rights (Donnelly, 2007). This theory is applicable to the case of Belarus, since the country is an authoritarian state and a former Soviet republic, where collective values and alternative human rights thinking might still prevail (Bekus, 2010). With the help of this theory, this thesis examines how human rights are interpreted in the Belarusian cultural context.

Most Western literature on human rights aims to defend the universality of human rights as an international project (Donnelly, 2013). Spagnoli (2007) argues that human rights are equal and universal rights, since every person is a human being and no one has more or less rights than anybody else. No group, nation or category of people should be deprived of human rights. According to Donnelly (2007), human rights cannot be taken away or denied, because being human is regarded to be a permanent part of nature, not something that one can obtain or lose. Accordingly, human rights are “universal” rights and everyone is “universally” entitled to these rights, without any discrimination. In addition, Haas (2014) claims that human rights are universal and should be protected everywhere in the world, as the principle of human rights is derived from the right to life, which is the most significant and undeniable right.

However, there has been a lack of consensus worldwide on the idea of the universality of human rights (Donnelly, 2007). According to Haas (2014), a number of non-Western scholars have raised serious objections to this idea, claiming that human rights are relative in character by belonging to a particular culture. The claims that human rights cannot be applied universally are presented in the theory of cultural relativism (Spagnoli, 2007).

Donnelly (2013:108) defines cultural relativism as following: “What we can call substantive cultural relativism is a normative doctrine that roots the legitimacy of social practices in culture and that demands respect for cultural differences.” In addition, cultural relativists do not consider that the rights contained in the Universal Declaration to be legally binding, as a consequence of the existence of different cultures. Cultural relativists interpret “right” as “traditional”, “good” as “old”, and “obligatory” as “habitual” (Donnelly, 2013:109).

One of the most important arguments of relativism-supporters is that the West attempts to impose its human rights project to the rest of the world (Haas, 2014). According to relativists, this human rights project is associated with Western culture, where individualism and individual freedoms are the most prominent values. Different cultures are inclined to emphasize harmony and collective goals rather than individualist values. They give importance to discipline and respect for authority, rather than freedom and democracy. Cultural relativists affirm that universal human rights have a destructive effect on other cultures by ruining the well-being of people belonging to these cultures (Spagnoli, 2007).

According to Haas (2014), cultural relativists justify their opposition to civil and political rights by using standards of their own culture. For example, Lee Kuan Yew, a former minister in Singapore, has emphasized and defended the idea of “Asian values”. This idea cherishes collectivism and the importance of community rather than separate individuals, and justifies the restriction of civil and political rights. In contrast to the West, which attempts to protect individuals from the oppressive state, the East tends to protect the state from individuals who fail to conduct themselves in an acceptable way. In other words, it is important to protect the state from uncontrolled individualism in order to guarantee harmony and stability (Haas, 2014:516). China and some other Asian countries have claimed that the Western human rights project is simply incompatible with Confucian culture (Haas, 2014:516).

Weatherley (1999) presents an interesting point concerning human rights attitudes in China. He argues that both Confucianism and the imperial Chinese legal tradition were not

welcoming to human rights. Despite acquiring the idea of rights during the period of Western Imperialism, the old Chinese tradition continued influencing the understanding of rights in the country. Even Chinese Marxism preserved a number of Confucian ideas. However, even though Weatherley (1999) notes that human rights violations in China cannot be justified, he urges the West to be cautious when criticizing China's violations of human rights, as the Chinese viewpoint could be quite acceptable (Weatherley, 1999).

Vladimir Makei (2013), the minister of foreign affairs of Belarus expresses similar ideas in his article: "Human Rights: what and who made them divide the world?" According to Makei (2013), one cannot change human rights attitudes across the world because they are inseparable from religion, history and culture. He argues that the division in views on human rights in the world is primarily connected to attributing importance either to individual or collective rights by different cultures. He emphasizes that human rights thinking has its origin in the particular historical development of different states. This development either shaped centralized states with collective values, or decentralized states, where the evolution of individualism took place.

Makei (2013) urges to take into account the historical factors while judging other countries' different attitudes toward human rights. He stresses that the Western civilization manifested the idea of the universality of human rights and attempted to transfer its values on other societies (Makei, 2013). As stated by Makei (2013), democracy and human rights stem from the historical development of Europe and in particular from the Protestant tradition. In other words, the West promotes universal human rights, which appear to be their own historically established values and beliefs. He criticizes the West's negative attitude to collectivism and attaches importance to building peace and harmony according to one's own historical traditions and values.

Some of Makei's (2013) ideas are in conformity with Fukuyama's (2011) historical explanation of the origin of democratic and authoritarian societies in "The origins of political order". Fukuyama (2011) explores the political history of inter alia Russia and China in comparison to the Western civilization. Both Russia and China were powerful absolutist states with despotic governments, a system that deprived the population of their rights, which has never been an attribute of European states. The rule of law has never fully developed in these countries (Fukuyama, 2011:391). According to Fukuyama, the fear of Mongols and a

weak state made Russian monarchy strengthen its grip on power. At the same time a strong feeling of community developed in Russia, as only by standing together they could succeed in dealing with external threats and move forward (Fukuyama, 2011). Fukuyama (2011) argues that Legalism and Confucianism has influenced the development of the Chinese centralized state. Legalism was supposed to strengthen the state and bind citizens to it, and Confucianism stressed morality, family, tradition and community. Consequently, it was impossible for individualism to develop in China.

### **2.2.2 Four ideas of relativism**

Donoho (1991) presents four main ideas of human rights related relativism. The first idea is that specific “abstract” human rights, for example equal protection or political participation, are inapplicable in certain cultural or political contexts. An example is Islamic states, which claim that non-discrimination of women and freedom of religion oppose the Sharia law, and are therefore alien to their culture.

Second, even if an abstract human right could be applicable in a specific culture, its interpretation and application depends upon the cultural and political characteristics of this specific society. For example, such concepts as justice, liberty, equality, and freedom could be interpreted in different ways depending upon a cultural and political context. For example, Americans and Chinese would interpret such rights as political participation and the right to work differently, due to dissimilar cultural background (Donoho, 1991).

The third idea affirms that the actual application of certain culturally based ideas should be protected from external judgment and action, as the West tends to criticize the state of human rights in other parts of the world (Donoho, 1991).

Finally, relativists claim that each state should apply their own interpretation of human rights based upon its cultural values, beliefs and political ideology. The Western civilization stresses the interrelationship of human rights and individualism as well as justice and inalienability of rights, which might be alien to Asian, African, and Hindu cultures. For example, the Chinese authorities justify the restrictions of freedom of speech as it can damage their “collective welfare” (Donoho, 1991).

However, Donnelley (2013) argues that the claims on relativity of human rights based on the cultural approach and suggestions on creating alternative tools on protection and realization of human rights should be given serious attention, as human rights are nothing else than

universal. Donnelley (2013:94) distinguishes three ways in which human rights can be described as universal: 1) Human rights are considered by nearly all states to be a part of international law and politics. 2) Theoretically, all cultures, nations and communities have a general agreement on these internationally recognized human rights. 3) The common agreement on the universality of human rights is based on the standard threats to human dignity presented by modern markets and modern states.

### **2.2.3 Individualism versus collectivism**

Individualism versus collectivism is a central approach within the theory of universality and relativity of human rights. I select this theoretical tool because Belarus has been considered the most typical “Soviet republic” (Bekus, 2010). Belarus preserved much of the Soviet structure and is described by its president as a country with collectivist values, which are opposed to Western individualism (Bekus, 2010). I will apply this theory on my analysis of the interviewees’ opinion on individual rights and forced labor issues. This theory can eventually explain why specific human rights violations are considered by Belarusians as obligations and not violations.

There exists a considerable amount of literature on human rights, which discusses individualism and collectivism. Individualism and collectivism are conflicting doctrines (Anderson, 1995). Individualism stresses a supreme importance of an individual, in contrast to society. According to individualism, society should only exist to benefit individuals, instead of the other way round (Anderson, 1995). According to collectivists, individuals should be subordinate to society, and should be required to act for the benefit of their society (Anderson, 1995). Individuals in the collectivist society are seen as social creatures and depend on each other, which is viewed as a positive thought. Individuals can fulfill themselves and achieve a better standard of living only as an inseparable part of their society (Anderson, 1995). At the same time, individualism is criticized for being unfavorable for less successful individuals, who need assistance from other members of society in order to maintain a decent standard of living or to survive (Anderson, 1995). In addition, collectivists value security and equality more than freedom (Anderson, 1995). In contrast to collectivists, individualists are not willing to sacrifice their personal values for the sake of society, because collective values are less attractive for them than their individual values (Anderson, 1995).

As a rule, Western scholars support individualism and criticize collectivism. According to Juviler (1993:268), "...individual rights remain the most widely recognized of human rights." One of the main characteristics of human rights is that they are individual rights, because every individual is entitled to his or her rights (Spagnoli, 2007). Donnelley (2013) points out that virtually all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration and the Conventions are the rights of individuals, except the right to self-determination. The Conventions normally begin with "Every human being", "Everyone has the right", "No one shall be", and "Everyone is entitled" (Donnelley, 2013:29).

Juviler (1993) considers collective or group rights to be much more controversial in comparison to individual rights. Unlike individual rights, collective rights are based on cultural peculiarity and membership in a community defined by this peculiarity. Donnelley (2013:48) defines collective or group rights as "...rights held by a corporate entity that is not reducible to its individual members." Donnelley (2013) argues that every single person who is a part of a group is entitled to his or her individual rights. Even if belonging to a specific group is paramount to the definition of human rights, individual group members and not a group as a collective have the rights. An example of workers' rights can illustrate this, where individual workers rather than workers as a group have workers' rights.

However, human rights advocates and scholars have conflicting opinions on the idea of collective rights as self-determination. Some of the scholars consider collective rights anti-human and non-recognizable in the human rights project. Others agree that there should be a limited recognition on collective rights in the sense of ethnic self-determination within a state or in the questions of separation from existing states (Juviler, 1993).

Finally, Anderson (1995) argues that a balance between collectivism and individualism should be achieved. The values of every single individual should stay important, but there should exist some common collective values. However, in the situations where the rights of individuals are in conflict with collective rights, individual rights should be prioritized (Anderson 1995).

## **2.3 Ideology**

The theory of ideology is another theoretical tool, which is related to the ideas of

individualism and collectivism, as they are the elements of opposing ideologies. I will investigate the term of ideology as values and identity thinking and apply it on my analysis of values, mentality and human rights thinking of Belarusians.

It must be noted that President Lukashenka has actively used “Foundations of the ideology of Belarusian state” as a central mechanism, which helped him to stay in power (Balmaceda, 2007). After defining the term of ideology, this section explores the theories of liberalism, socialism and communism. It is almost certain that Belarus has inherited the Soviet ideology, which still has socialist and communist elements, as president Lukashenka keeps criticizing Western liberalism (Lukashenka, 2003).

### **2.3.1 Definition and structure**

There exists a huge body of literature on ideology. However, it is impossible to single out one complementary definition of this term. Eagleton (2007) lists a number of definitions of ideology to show the diversity of meanings of the notion. According to Eagleton (2007:1-2), the term ideology can be defined as: 1) The process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life. 2) A body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class. 3) Ideas, which help to legitimate a dominant political power. 4) False ideas, which help to legitimate a dominant political power. 5) Forms of thoughts motivated by social interests. 6) Identity thinking. 7) Action-oriented sets of beliefs. 8) The indispensable medium, in which individuals live out of their relation to a social structure.

The term ideology originates from two conflicting ideas. De Tracy has introduced the term of ideology for the first time as a “science of ideas”, while Napoleon used the term as a set of false, subversive ideas (MacKenzie, 2003). Further, Marx-Engels presented ideology as a negative image by describing ideologies as systems of misconceived ideas (Van Dijk, 2013:2). These ideas considered false as they reflect class interests, in particular the interests of the German middle class, rather than the interests of everyone (MacKenzie, 2003:4).

Van Dijk (2013) defines ideology as basic socially shared belief system, which controls group attitudes, opinions and mental models of group members about specific events and experiences. In addition, this belief system is shared by a specific group of people and is alien to other ideological groups, as members of different ideological groups disagree with each other’s views and beliefs (Van Dijk, 2013). To illustrate this, Van Dijk (2013) exemplifies different interpretations of the notion of freedom, which can be understood in various ways

depending on ideology and interests of ideological groups. Thus, one ideological group can associate the notion of freedom with freedom of the market, and another with freedom of expression or freedom from oppression.

Van Dijk (1998) suggests a structure, which organizes the beliefs of an ideology into six categories: The first one is identity, which describes members of a social group. The second category defines activities of a social group and its role in society. The third one regulates the goals of a social group and the fourth defines its norms and values. The fifth category determines who are friends and enemies of a social group. Finally, the sixth category includes a group's material and symbolic resources as well as its position in society (Van Dijk, 2013).

Accordingly, the term ideology seems to be closely related to the notions "values", "mentality" "attitudes" and "thinking", which are central within this research. Oxford dictionary defines "values" as "Principles or standards of behavior and one's judgment of what is important in life", "mentality" as "The characteristic way of thinking of a person or group", "attitudes" as "A settled way of thinking or feeling about something" and thinking as "A person's ideas or opinions" (English Oxford Living Dictionaries). It is important to note, that due to similar definitions of the terms "attitudes" and "thinking" the expressions "human rights thinking" and "human rights attitudes" used in this thesis will in overlap each other.

### **2.3.2 Ideology and human rights**

Murphy (1972) argues that ideologies have influenced the process of creation of international human rights. For example, economic, social and cultural rights listed in the Universal Declaration have an ideological basis, and their source of origin is Marxist-Leninist thought and the 1917 October Revolution. In addition, even if social and cultural rights and values have been promoted worldwide, socialist countries have emphasized these rights and viewed them as a paramount goal of their governments (Murphy, 1972). The Soviet Union even attacked civil and political rights as "bourgeois values" (Haas, 2014:93). Further, during the Cold War the two sides in the debate between the primacy of civil and political rights versus economic and social rights were ideologically determined (Haas, 2014).

### **2.3.3 Liberalism versus socialism and communism**

According to Freedman and Stears (2013:1-2), the central concepts in liberalism are rights, political obligation, justice, equality, democracy, and liberty. Liberalism has played an



important role for the implementation of modern political practices in governing and has been a drive toward a social inclusiveness on the way to individual recognition and participation. MacKenzie (2003) argues that the social and political world consists of individuals who, even if they interact with each other, remain primarily independent defined by their individuality, which is a principle of liberalism. The main feature of a political life is individual choices and decisions about how people have to manage their coexistence (MacKenzie, 2003).

Liberalism is the leading ideology of the Western civilization and is often associated with a set of individualistic ideas, emphasizing a particular form of freedom and autonomy, which involves the development and safeguard of individual rights, social equality, and limitations on the interventions of social and political power (Freeden and Stears, 2013:1-2). According to Eccleshall (2003), the core idea of liberalism is to protect individual liberties by establishing a system where all citizens will have equal rights.

Marxists have opposed and strongly criticized liberal individualism and claimed that civil liberty advanced by liberalism is at odds with deeper human needs and social development (Murphy, 1981:438). As an opposition to liberalism, the common features of both communist and socialist ideologies are an active intervention of government in order to achieve the implementation of economic, social, and cultural rights and achievement of equality - a classless society (Brown, 2013, Murphy, 1972). Both communism and socialism stress redistribution of wealth or repeal of private property to eliminate inequality. Genuine democracy for Marxists is a combination of equality, importance of community and liberty (Geoghean, 2003, Brown, 2013).

Both socialists and communists criticize a concept of free market and liberalism in general. They claim that the liberty of free market undermine both freedom, which is manifested in constitutional rights, and the actual free activity of the citizens; free markets contribute to poverty and poor people cannot be completely free (Geoghean, 2003:76, Brown, 2013). According to Marxists, genuine freedom can only be achieved when an individual preoccupies himself or herself with the needs of society (Murphy, 1972:302).

## **2.4 The social contract theory**

### **2.4.1 Definition of the concept**

The social contract theory is applicable to the theme of human rights in Belarus as it reflects the structure of Belarusian society and contributes to the understanding of the populations' attitudes toward stability and security in contrast to civil liberties.

According to Haas (2014:35), the core idea of the social contract theory is giving up freedoms in exchange for order and security. As individuals have an unsteady and insecure existence, they need to contract with government to achieve protection. The idea of the social contract appears inter alia in "Leviathan" by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes argues that there exists an unwritten social contract between the state and its citizens, by which citizens agree to give up their natural liberty in order to secure their natural right to life, and to obtain the benefits of political order (Fukuyama, 2011).

According to Haiduk, Rakova and Silitski (2009:4-5), the social contract is based on a clear and direct nonverbal agreement between the authorities and citizens and contains mutual obligations and restrictions related to pursuing their interests. Due to this agreement, both the authorities and citizens receive certain guarantees. Citizens are provided with security, order and well-being, as long as they respect and follow the rules conceived by the authorities. As a result, both the authorities and citizens enjoy various advantages: the authorities receive a virtual guarantee of staying in power, by eliminating citizens' inducement and desire for political changes; citizens in turn give up particular rights and freedoms, in exchange for guarantees of stability and security in their daily life.

Haiduk et al. (2009) argue that according to the social contract theory, it is presumably more beneficial for citizens to comply with the system, instead of striving for "more", as the attempts to obtain "more" may lead to a decline of their living standard. In addition, one is never sure whether protesting against the authorities could have a positive outcome. Moreover, the majority is not ready to sacrifice their personal well-being for the sake of greater well-being for everyone (Haiduk, et al., 2009).

#### **2.4.2 The structure of the social contract**

The structure of the social contract is based on three benefits provided by the state: the material benefits (1), like wages, pensions and other direct payments; the welfare related benefits (2), like education, medical care and security; and the non-material elements (3), like a positive image of the state. The non-material benefits are defined as ideological constructs and are based on the ideas of patriotism, strong state, and the system of values, various symbols, stereotypes and “social myths”, which in some cases are enforced by the state through the media (Haiduk et al., 2009:72).

#### **2.4.3 The social contract in Belarus**

Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies based in Vilnius has conducted research on the social contract in Belarus in 2009 and 2014. The publications “Social contracts in contemporary Belarus” by Haiduk et al., (2009), and a revised publication “Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus: Variables and Constants” (2014), by Pikulik, Yeliseyeu and Artsiomenka, describe the existing social contract between the state and various groups of the population: waged workers, pensioners, youth, business, and civil servants.

According to Haiduk et al., (2009), the core characteristic of the social contract in Belarus is stability, provided by the state in the form of various packages of benefits, which is approved by its citizens. It is critical to note, that this agreement was not reached through democratic means (Haiduk, et al., 2009).

The system of social contract and paternalist traditions in Belarus root back to the Soviet times, when Belarus was described as “the best Soviet republic”. Therefore, president Lukashenka only preserved the existing system by continuing to control the society by means of economic “contractual” instruments (Haiduk et al., 2009). The level of public satisfaction has been controlled by the state through various interventions in the case of unrest and through the introduction of new policies to combat corruption or to roll back reforms of social benefits (Haiduk et al., 2009).

Haiduk et al. (2009), distinguish several key elements, which construct the social contract system in Belarus. The first one is, “anything for a life without war”, especially supported by the pensioners, who constitute a quarter of the population. The state delivers this package along with public order, as well as clean towns and cities (Haiduk et al., 2009).

Another integral part of the social contract in Belarus is public sector employment. The state is the largest employer in the country and the share of jobs in the private sector remains quite small. About 80 percent of Belarusians are employed in the public sector (Haiduk et al., 2009). In addition, the state has managed to keep a high employment rate in the country. The Belarusian welfare system does not provide substantial benefits to the unemployed and an unemployment payment is approximately a quarter of the minimum wage. To receive this payment, the unemployed are obliged to participate in community labor (Haiduk et al., 2009). The third essential element of the social contract is the comparatively low, but stable income, and a wage increase prior to elections. The existence of a single state pension system and absence of private pension funds makes withdrawal from the official employment unattractive. Pension payments are guaranteed to all citizens by Belarusian legislation, and are increased along with wage increase (Haiduk et al., 2009).

## **2.5 Summary**

The main goal of the current chapter was to establish a theoretical framework for the empirical research. To achieve this, I have examined the theory of universalism versus relativism within the concept of human rights, the theory of individualism versus collectivism, the concept of ideology and the theory of the social contract. This theoretical framework determines the direction of this study and contributes to validating the research results by enhancing the empiricism and the accuracy of the research. Thus, as mentioned above, the theories of universalism-relativism, individualism-collectivism and ideology are relevant for the empirical analysis of this study as Belarus is a former Soviet republic, defined as an authoritarian state. Therefore, based on the theoretical constructs mentioned above, the implications for the research are the following: Belarusians might still have collectivist values inherited from the USSR and they might emphasize social-economic rather than civil and political rights. Furthermore, the theory of relativism might shed light on Belarusians' interpretation of human rights in their own cultural context, which might be alternative due their Soviet heritage and the influence of the state ideology (Bekus, 2010). Additionally, the theory of ideology could be relevant for the analysis as president Lukashenka have been using the Belarusian ideology as one of the tools, which helped him to stay in power (Balmaceda, 2007). The theory of the social contract is applicable to the case of Belarus, as there exists previous research on the issue suggesting that Belarus is characterized by the strong presence of the social contract system (Haiduk et al., 2009). Thus, a possible anticipation for the empirical findings is that Belarusians prioritize order, security and stability rather than

democracy and respect of human rights. Additionally, a possible implication for the analysis is that Belarusians are not ready to protest against the regime as striving for more may lead to deterioration of the current situation in the country, destroying order and stability which is possibly of supreme importance for the Belarusian population.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research methods selected for this thesis. In the first section, I explain the main characteristics of mixed method research, qualitative research and the reasons for choosing this approach. In the second section, I present the case-study approach. Further, I give an account of the data collection process, the choice of interviewees, and describe the challenges I faced throughout the process of collecting interview data. In the end, I present a brief methodology discussion, which includes credibility and validity of the results.

#### **3.1 Mixed method research**

As explained earlier, the purpose of this study is to collect comprehensive information about Belarusians' attitudes toward human rights and human rights violations in their country. It is therefore appropriate to use a mixed method, which involves a combination of in-depth qualitative interviews with the Belarusian population and quantitative research. According to Creswell (2012:22), "Mixed methods designs are procedures for collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a multiphase series of studies." The advantage of using this method is that the combination of both forms of data provides a better understanding of the phenomenon we study by providing more detailed and specific information than using a quantitative or qualitative method alone (Creswell, 2012:22). As Everett and Furseth (2012) emphasize, the research question is decisive for which methodology is relevant for the research. The mixed method is therefore the most optimal method for providing the answer to my research question. A qualitative methodological approach is applied to obtain profound information about interviewees' attitudes toward human rights, while quantitative research is applied to increase the sample size and to generalize the results (Creswell, 2012).

For practical reasons, I was unable to conduct quantitative research by myself. Instead, I conducted the analysis of secondary quantitative data collected from reports "Belarus: public

opinion about human rights and advocacy” (Freedom House, 2016), “Civil literacy in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus” (UNDP, 2017), “Annual survey report: Belarus – 3rd wave” (EU Neighbors East, 2018), “Belarus between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union: A national values survey” (Korosteleva, 2016), “Social Contracts in Contemporary Belarus: Variables and Constants” (Pikulik et.al, 2014) and “Social contracts in contemporary Belarus” (Haiduk, et al., 2009).

However, I experienced difficulties applying this method, as the secondary data set did not contain exactly the same information as the qualitative interview findings. As a result, I had difficulties making conclusions lacking some quantitative data, which could validate the qualitative findings and contribute to answering the research question.

### **3.2 Qualitative research**

According to Creswell (2012), while applying a mixed method, the researcher decides which form of data will be given a priority. Thus, applying this method, I emphasized the qualitative data more than the quantitative data. Therefore, I provide a detailed description of the qualitative interview method below.

The advantage of a qualitative interview methodology is the possibility to obtain detailed in-depth data from the interviewees and explore their views, experiences, beliefs and attitudes (Thagaard, 2013). Using this method, I intend to provide a “deeper” understanding of the interviewees’ thoughts, experiences and their assessment of human rights and the human rights situation in their country. It would be impossible to acquire this type of information from quantitative questionnaires (Thagaard, 2013). According to Thagaard (2013), the main difference between qualitative and quantitative methods is that qualitative methods search to provide in-depth information, while quantitative methods focus on numbers and quantities (Thagaard, 2013). As Thagaard (2013) notes, qualitative approaches provide the basis for going in depth in the social phenomena we study, and is characterized by close contact between a researcher and interviewees. As a result, one can gain an understanding of social phenomena based on comprehensive data about people and situations (Thagaard, 2013).

Qualitative interviews have been the main method of data collection for this thesis. However, I have also used a text analysis method as a supplementary method. I have analyzed the literature on the ideology of Belarusian state and the statements of president Lukashenka on

the topic. The purpose of this analysis is to compare the opinion of the interviewees concerning values, mentality and the official ideology of the Belarusian state with the statements of the president and data collected from the publications on the official ideology of Belarusian state.

### **3.3 Case study**

As a qualitative research strategy, I have used a case study. According to Andersen (14, 2013), the purpose of case study research is to obtain an in-depth understanding of one or few entities, which could be organizations, decisions, a discourse, a course of events and a statement. In other words, case studies are concerned with the unique (Andersen, 2013). Thus, through a case study approach, I tried to delineate my study area by choosing Belarus and the topic of human rights. Further, I have focused on Belarusians' human rights attitudes, which illustrates Belarusians' opinion on human rights issues and how they experience the human rights situation in their country. As Andersen (2013) notes, case studies normally answer the question "how" something happens and is experienced, rather than "why".

According to Andersen (2013), a study of a unique individual case can be seen as a typical example of one or more types of phenomenon, certain knowledge of which already exists. If I adhere to Andersen's (2013) approach, my case study can be classified as a theoretical interpretive study, the purpose of which is to describe, interpret, and explain the phenomena on the basis of existing theories. In this thesis, different approaches within human rights like relativism versus universalism and the social contract theory are used to shed light on the empirical research, concerning the case of Belarus and Belarusians' values and human rights attitudes.

### **3.4 Data collection**

#### **3.4.1 Interviewees**

According to Thagaard (2013), the principles for selecting interviewees are significant for the transferability of research. As the main purpose of this study is to find out what attitudes to human rights and the regime Belarusians have, the recruitment of interviewees who represent "an ordinary population" is essential. Criteria for selecting interviewees are as follows: both

women and men should be equally represented, as well as they should represent different age groups and professional backgrounds.

Recruiting a random sample of individuals for interviewing appeared to be a complex task. All the individuals, contacted by door-to-door canvassing, refused to be interviewed. One of them commented that he would not participate in the research, as he was afraid to lose his employment. I had an impression that the unwillingness to be interviewed was connected to the sensitivity of the topic of the research.

As random sampling method did not work, I had to adhere to “the snowball method”. According to Thagaard (2013), “the snowball method” involves contacting potential interviewees, who suggest other individuals suitable for the research. Therefore, I contacted various individuals from my network in Belarus asking them to participate in the research and to suggest other potential interviewees. A few of those suggested individuals refused to be interviewed as well; however, I managed to conduct 13 interviews in the end. As it was difficult to recruit individuals for interviewing, five of the interviewees were my acquaintances, which could be a disadvantage. Nevertheless, as I did not have any special personal relationship to these individuals, the interview process went well. Eight interviewees were random individuals contacted through my network or by other interviewees. Interestingly, I experienced that the interviewees who knew me personally were more open and provided much deeper responses in comparison to the rest of the sample. It is important to note that the interviewees I recruited belong to different networks and come from three different regions of Belarus: Gomel, Mogilev and Minsk region.

I introduce the interviewees in the table 1 and refer to them as for example M30 and F23, where M and F refers to sex and number to age. This system is appropriate as one can easily see the age and sex of the individuals, which, as shown later, is quite significant. In addition to the formal interviews, I had informal conversations with a few Belarusians I met while I was in Belarus. I use statements from one of them in my discussion as well. He is not registered in the table and is referred to as M48.



**Table 1: The interviewees**

N	Profession/occupation	Sex	Age	Reference
1	Engineer, working retiree	F	60	F60
2	Veterinarian	F	42	F42
3	Building engineer	M	33	M33
4	Electrician	M	50	M50-1
5	Accountant	F	52	F52
6	Economist, works as a waitress	F	23	F23
7	Graduating student, teacher	F	22	F22
8	Lawyer	M	50	M50-2
9	Businessman	M	30	M30-1
10	Engineer	F	24	F24
11	Security guard	M	30	M30-2
12	Teacher	F	40	F40
13	Economist, retiree	M	62	M62

### 3.4.2 Interview process

As discussed above, I used individual in-depth interviews during a two weeks trip to Belarus, which is a quite short period of time. Consequently, a shortage of time was the biggest disadvantage when conducting the research. I met eight interviewees personally, while five interviewees were interviewed on telephone or Skype. The interviews I conducted were mostly structural, where a questionnaire with a number of pre-planned questions set in a predetermined order was used. An advantage of structural interviews is that they are easy to administer and can be of a particular use if a researcher needs to compare the answers of interviewees since the same questions and topics have been used (Thagaard, 2013).

Although I used a questionnaire for the structural interview, I frequently used follow-up questions to responses that demanded adding more information. Additionally, the interviewees were free to deviate from the topic in order to discuss non-predetermined

questions, which is an element of a semi-structural interview (Thagaard, 2013). Thus, the interviews I conducted could be defined as structural with semi-structural elements. Overall, I was not completely satisfied with the interview process because of two main issues. The first issue, as pointed out above, was a shortage of time. On average, the interviewing took an hour or an hour and a half. However, I felt that I needed more time to explore the details. Just over half the sample (seven interviewees) were only available for an hour. Unfortunately, it was not possible to meet them for the second round of interviews. The second problem I faced was that the topic of my research was too complicated for some of the interviewees. Four of the interviewees provided rather poor responses to the majority of the questions and “I do not know” was their typical answer. A few other interviewees had difficulties answering the questions concerning human rights and ideology.

My overall impression was that I managed to establish good relations with the interviewees during the interview process and that the interviewees provided consistent, honest and non-evasive responses. However, one interviewee, whom I met personally after conducting a phone interview, confessed that he avoided providing certain information on the phone. This individual noted that he feared phone tapping by his employer. The issue concerned workers’ rights in Belarus, with which this individual was not satisfied. That is why a question could be asked whether other individuals interviewed on the phone were not open enough. This episode raises questions about the quality of the collected data. Overall, despite my dissatisfaction with the data collection process, due to difficulties I met in recruiting of interviewees and a shortage of time, I feel that the data I collected through the interview process is sufficient for providing the answer to the research question.

### **3.5 Credibility**

With regards to qualitative interviewing, questions are often raised about the quality of this method (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). The main question regarding the quality concerns the objectivity of qualitative interview research. Objectivity refers to reliable knowledge that is verified and controlled, unaffected by personal attitudes and prejudices (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), the objectivity of research is connected to validity, reliability and generalizability of the results. Below I present the discussion of reliability and validity of the research, while I give an account of generalizability of the findings in the conclusion.

### **3.5.1 Reliability**

Reliability is connected to the consistency and credibility of the research results and refers to the question of whether the same result can be reproduced by other researchers at different times (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Additionally, according to Tjora (2012), reliability refers to researcher's engagement and personal relation to the project.

While working on my thesis, I was aware of the fact that my special relationship with Belarus, as a former citizen of the country, could influence the research results. My background and knowledge of Belarusian history, the culture and the way of life could have both advantages and disadvantages. A clear advantage is the absence of cultural misunderstandings and translation issues because I speak the language. A possible disadvantage is, that my engagement and personal relation to the research could influence the results and contribute to subjectivity (Tjora, 2012). Bearing this in mind while working on the thesis, I attempted to maintain a neutral position within the research. An exact reproduction of the research could prove difficult, since it is unlikely that other researchers would obtain identical responses from the interviewees. However, it is almost certain that other researchers would receive similar results using the methodology applied for this thesis while conducting the same research.

Further, Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) discuss the quality of interviewing in connection to transcribing the interview results. He presents an example of the same statement transcribed by different researchers in different ways. Unfortunately, only five interviewees agreed to a digital audio recording of the interview. In the rest of cases, I was making notes, which was not the optimal way to register data. I tried to make my notes as detailed as possible, which destroyed the natural flow of the conversation, as the interviewees had to wait while I was writing my notes. According to Tjora (2012), recording interviewees strengthens the validity of the research because the researcher has the possibility to use exact direct quotes from the interviewees. It might be that while taking notes I missed some details. However, some of the interviewees agreed to be contacted through Skype in case I needed to obtain more information later, which I did in a few cases, when I needed to use direct quotes.

### **3.5.2 Validity**

According to Thagaard (2013), validity is connected to the interpretation of data and whether the researcher's interpretation of that data is valid in relation to the reality. I have tried to be conscious of the way I was interpreting the data knowing that my interpretation would affect the results. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) note, a researcher should have a critical view of his interpretations and how he or she explicitly expresses his or her perspective on the subject being studied. However, the validity of my interpretations seems to be strengthened by the secondary data sources, which made me feel secure while interpreting the data. Throughout the analysis chapter, I tried to compare my findings with other relevant research, which appeared to conform in the majority of cases. Moreover, I attempted to clarify the distinction between the data generated through the qualitative research methods, and interpretations of this data (Tjora, 2012).

## **4. BACKGROUND**

The Republic of Belarus is an authoritarian state with flawed elections and strongly restricted civil liberties (Freedom house, 2018). One of the main causes of the systemic abuse of human rights and the entrenched repression in the country is the centralization of all powers in the hands of president Lukashenka (UN, 2017).

As one of the former fifteen Soviet states to emerge after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, over the past two decades Belarus has tended to be the most overlooked and least understood of them (Frear, 2019:2). The predictions about the collapse of the regime proved to be wrong, as it, surprisingly enough, appeared to be stable and long lasting, becoming a “non-democratic hole in the heart of Europe” (Frear, 2019:1). President Lukashenka continues to stay the first and the only president of Belarus (Frear, 2019), who once again won a non-democratic presidential election in 2015 (Freedom House, 2018).

### **4.1 A brief history of Belarus**

“The history of Belarus has been a series of false starts under different names” (Wilson, 2011:255). Diverse parts of its territories have been “Krywia”, Polatsk, Lithuania, Ruthenia, Uniate-land, west-Russia, Soviet Belorussia and in the end independent Belarus (Wilson, 2011:255). While Central and Eastern Europe were on the path of democratization and market

reform after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Belarus remained an exception. The country represented a unique case, a very different sort of phenomenon than that of Russia or pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine (Balmaceda, 2007).

The historic development of Belarus can provide an explanation to the country's dissimilarity from its neighboring states. Belarus was one of the Russian Empire's poorest regions characterized by the absence of natural strength in agriculture. During the Second World War, the country suffered severe destruction of a large proportion of its population. Belarus was completely rebuilt between the 1960s and 1980s, and, unlike other regions of the USSR, received investment in spite of the shortage of funds caused by 1980 Moscow Olympics. Despite being located close to Western borders and markets, the country remained politically loyal to the USSR, unlike the Baltic States and western Ukraine (Wilson, 2011:237). Soviet planning and the benefits of geographical location made Belarus an important energy transit state (Wilson, 2011:238). Belarus was often characterized as "the most perfectly Soviet" republic of the USSR, with its increasing living standards after 1945, a highly Russified population, intensive industrialization and a high education level among its citizens (Balmaceda, 2007:195).

Additionally, Belarus had a different model of democratic development than many other Soviet states even before Lukashenka become the president in 1994. During the Soviet period, Belarus was considered an exceptional state, as the Soviet system seemed to work well there and an underground opposition to the regime was almost inexistent (Balmaceda, 2007:195).

It became even more obvious how different Belarus was from its neighbors Ukraine and Lithuania during the perestroika<sup>1</sup> period. The growth of a comprehensive nationalist independent movement has never taken place in Belarus due to a relatively weak Belarusian national identity and the establishment of an entrenched communist elite. The opposition movement Belarusian Popular Front has never managed to achieve a broad popularity, being represented by a small group of intellectuals. Furthermore, new sovereign Belarus was established by the same communist elite who had actively resisted independence a year later (Balmaceda, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> (in the former Soviet Union) the policy or practice of restructuring or reforming the economic and political system (English Oxford Living Dictionaries).

After Lukashenka was unexpectedly elected at the first presidential elections of Belarus in 1994, his rule has gradually become a subject of controversy (Frear, 2019). A controversial referendum at the end of 1996 allowed Lukashenka to strengthen his rule at the expense of the other branches of the government (Frear, 2019). “Elections themselves have become decreasingly important, as Lukashenka has grown increasingly skilled at fixing them” (Wilson, 2011:255). Since then he has been repeatedly reelected, continuing oppressing the opposition, the independent media and the civil society (Frear, 2019).

President Lukashenka managed to institutionalize his regime, preserving social and economic stability in Belarus and at the same time avoiding the economic reforms. Nevertheless, the large state-owned enterprises have remained impaired in the country. “The long wage arrears workers often experienced in mid-1990s Ukraine and Russia seldom occurred in Lukashenka’s Belarus, and monthly salaries have continually increased since the mid- 1990s” (Balmaceda, 2007:196). Belarus has remained the only country in Eastern and Central Europe where the economic system has not experienced fundamental changes since the dissolution of the USSR (Balmaceda, 2007). Massive privatization has never occurred in Belarus, and cross-subsidized state companies generated 75 percent of GDP and 64.8 percent of state budget revenue in 2008 (Klysinski and Wierzbowska-Miazga, 2009 in Wilson, 2011: 240). It is noteworthy that one of the main sources of stability and economic growth in the country from 1994 to 2006 was Russia’s heavy subsidization of Belarus’s economy (Balmaceda, 2007:208).

Thus, Lukashenka has been able to maintain his grip on power by curbing the development of the private economic sector, applying repression, providing stability to the Belarusian population, and increasing the application of the state ideology (Balmaceda, 2007). From 2002, Lukashenka started stressing the necessity to develop a national Belarusian ideology and instituting the tools to promote it. Since 2004, it is mandatory for students at Belarusian universities to take a course on “Foundations of the ideology of the Belarusian state”. Ideological control has also been established in the state and private companies, where a person in charge of “ideological work” was assigned. Additionally, each workplace was required to conduct obligatory monthly ideology discussion meetings. Emphasizing Belarusian sovereignty is central to “The Belarusian state ideology”. The regime has used the issue of sovereignty to justify the non-existent changes to its domestic policies (Balmaceda, 2007).

Another step to consolidate the regime's power was moving all state employees to fixed-term contracts (six months or a year) in 2004. This new contract system increased the regime's control by providing an opportunity to dismiss independent union members and political activists. Additionally, it made Belarusians fearful of losing their employment if they opposed the regime (Balmaceda, 2007). Consequently, as the possibility of employment in the private sector remains almost non-existent (approximately 80 percent of the population is employed by the state), as well as dependence on state stipends and pensions, the citizens of Belarus remain economically dependent on the state (Balmaceda, 2007).

## **4.2 Democracy and human rights in Belarus**

In the "Democracy index 2018" by The Economist (2018), Belarus scores 3.13 out of 10 (10 being best), and takes one hundred thirty-seventh place in the global ranking. Various organizations report the absence of effective human rights guarantees in Belarus (Viasna 2018, Freedom House, 2018). Although the overall level of repression in Belarus declined in 2018 in comparison to 2017, the human rights situation remains unchanged, and civil and political rights remain infringed in the country (Viasna, 2018). Political participation is almost impossible for Belarusians, as the opportunities for making political choices and expressing their opinion remain limited. Politically active individuals can risk losing employment, expulsion from schools and universities, fines, and the confiscation of property (Freedom House, 2018). Human rights defenders are harassed and there were still cases of politically motivated arrests and detentions in 2018 (Viasna, 2018). In 2018 the human rights organization Viasna has registered 184 cases of administrative convictions for participation in political meetings involving 144 persons, which included sentences of detention and fines (Viasna, 2018).

Freedom of expression is restricted in Belarus as the government almost fully controls the mainstream media in the country. There are cases of persecution and harassment of journalists who work for the independent media. According to Viasna, in 2018 there were 132 cases of administrative persecution of journalists, accused for collaborating with the foreign media (Viasna, 2018). The regime has regularly used articles 367 (defamation of the President), 368 (insult of the President) and 369 (insult of public officials) of the Criminal Code to keep critical voices silent. These articles provide for up to five years of imprisonment (UN, 2017:9).

Freedom of assembly is infringed in Belarus, as the citizens must obtain an authorization to hold demonstrations from local authorities, which can in turn arbitrarily reject their applications (Freedom House, 2018). It used to be a standard practice for police to disrupt demonstrations and arrest participants. The authorities changed their practices recently due to their attempts to reconcile with the EU and the USA and started using fines to punish demonstrators (Freedom House, 2018).

Freedom of association is another right, which is severely restricted in Belarus. The membership in banned or unregistered parties is criminalized, while various parties and organizations face registration refusals by the authorities. As requirements for registration of labor unions remains strict, no independent labor unions have been registered since 1999. Independent labor unions, which attempt to fight for workers' rights are harassed, and their leaders are sacked and prosecuted (Freedom House, 2018). Although Belarusians have received more economic freedom lately, in the form of property and small businesses ownership, the owners of large businesses still face restrictions and harassment from the authorities (Freedom House, 2018).

Moreover, Belarusians still experience forced labor in their country. The most typical form of forced labor is compulsory unpaid national workdays. Under president Lukashenka, compulsory unpaid national workdays are held under special regulations and include either work to clean an area or work at one's workplace, but unpaid. Wages for that day are transferred to a special fund. It is possible for companies to buy their way out of the compulsory unpaid national workdays by transferring a sum agreed upon in advance to this special fund. A nationwide compulsory unpaid workday is held every April (Viasna, 2013:35). Furthermore, as alcoholism is one of the most serious problems in Belarus, correctional medical rehabilitation labor centers or medical "sober stations" are actively used in Belarus to fight alcoholism. They represent a means of compulsory isolation and medical and social rehabilitation through the use of mandatory labor for citizens suffering from chronic alcoholism or drug addiction (Viasna, 2013:39). Additionally, Belarusians still experience a compulsory postgraduate employment allocation and restrictions on resigning from jobs (Freedom House, 2018). According to Viasna (2018), there are still cases of students harvesting agricultural products and mandatory unpaid cleanups.



Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that president Lukashenka governs applying repression against a population that provides active resistance. In reality, his strongman rule is founded on a combination of tradition, demagoguery, intimidation, persecution, oppression and the control of the media (Balmaceda, 2007). Not surprisingly, Belarus is called a paradoxical state, authoritarian but not poor, with a well-functioning welfare system, which provides a reasonable standard of living and social protection for large groups of the population (Lahviniec and Papko, 2010). At the same time, the question arises whether President Lukashenka and his regime will face various dilemmas in the near future. The economic model, that sustained his regime until the global economic crisis in 2008 is worn out and is on the verge of collapse. It is obvious that the regime is running out of money to keep the population satisfied (Wilson, 2011).

## **5. ANALYSIS**

This chapter explores four main topics, which form the following subchapters or categories: (1) Belarusian values, mentality and ideology, (2) Human rights and human rights violations in the country, (3) The aspects of the social contract in Belarus and (4) Political participation and the future. The findings within different categories may in a few cases overlap each other. In subchapter 1 and 2 I discuss and attempt to draw conclusions about whether Belarusians' values, ideology and attitudes toward human rights are in conformity with the concept of the universality of human rights, which is the first sub-question within my central research question. In subchapters 3 and 4 I discuss the topic of the social contract and Belarusians' readiness to stand up for their rights, which provides the answer to the second and third sub-questions. To explore this topic, I examine various aspects within the social contract system in Belarus. In particular, I explore the benefits provided by the state to its citizens, which are the material and welfare benefits, the non-material benefits as well as order and security.

### **5.1 Values, mentality and ideology**

#### **5.1.1 Values and mentality**

Among the typical values of the Belarusian population, the interviewees mention patriotism, motherland, family, history (in particular The Great Patriotic War), hospitality, diligence and patience. The specific features of Belarusian society and mentality, according to the

interviewees are kindness, humbleness, patience, tolerance, benevolence, responsiveness and helpfulness. A few interviewees mention that Belarusians are hardworking and peaceful and that they are interested in helping each other even if they are strangers.

A few of the elements mentioned by the interviewees are in conformity with Belarusian values and mentality features listed by Babosov (2013) in “Foundations of the ideology of the Belarusian State”, which are: patriotism, diligence, goodwill, equality and tolerance, aspiration for personal freedom and independence, respecting traditions, hospitality and readiness to help each other. Jaskevich (2013) in her version of “Foundations of the ideology of the Belarusian state” singles out similar values typical to Belarusians: rejection of conflicts and violence, aspirations of stability and equality, peacefulness and compliance, which seems to be in conformity with the opinion of the interviewees.

Although no one describes their values as collective directly, it seems that the elements of collectivism are present in the responses of the majority of the interviewees. For example, the interviewees describe Belarusians as a benevolent people, a responsive people, a helpful people and a people that are interested in helping each other even if they are strangers. These values reflect the idea of the collectivist society, where individuals are seen as social creatures and depend on help from each other (Anderson, 1995). Moreover, the majority of those who responded to this item stress the supreme importance of family, which could be compared with Confucian values (Fukuyama, 2011). Additionally, such values as history, patriotism and The Great Patriotic war mentioned by a few interviewees could indicate the importance of historic tradition, which is also stressed by relativists (Donnelley, 2013).

Interestingly, the most often mentioned element is patience, or a patient people. Babosov (2013) supports this idea and states that one of the most important traditional characteristics of Belarusians is patience. A few participants express the belief that Belarusian patience could be characterized as unwillingness to protest in a case of oppression or injustice, reluctance to fight for their rights and get involved in any actions to change the situation in their country. They note that the population got used to changes and the deteriorating economic situation in the country. For example, as two interviewees say:

We are a very patient people. If we are unsatisfied with something, we will complain to ourselves, we will grumble for a couple of days and then we will forget about the problem. We are not satisfied with the situation, but we keep silent (M30-2).

The typical features of our mentality are to work for little money, to work for nothing and keep silent. We do not want conflicts, as we are peaceful people. We hide inside our shell and if we are not satisfied with the actions of our president, we do it quietly. However, we are not cowards, we are just patient. It is difficult to change our mentality after it has been enforced by the state for the last 30 years, especially for my generation (M62).

The findings, illustrating Belarusian patience, could suggest the prevalence of relativist approach toward human rights. As prior studies on relativism have noted, other cultures give importance to discipline and respect for authority, rather than individual freedom and democracy (Spagnoli, 2007). One could compare Belarusian values to Confucian tradition, which, according to Huntington (1996), stresses importance of hierarchy and compliance in the face of authority, the importance of consensus and keeping away from conflicts. In other words, Confucianism emphasizes the dominance of the state over society and of society over the individual (Huntington, 1996).

The overall response to the question about the difference between Belarusian and Western values is poor. Over half of the participants report their inability to answer the question because they have never been abroad. A few of them note that Belarusian values, culture and traditions are different, without being able to give a detailed explanation of the issue. However, a small number of those interviewed suggest:

There are gay parades in the Western countries, which is unacceptable for us. I am negative to the EU and against the relations with the EU. They have a different mentality and we will not be able to be a part of it, to integrate with it. We can only have a union with Russia. We do not understand the Western way of thinking. They have a very different mentality. Belarus cannot have the same model as the Western countries (M50-1).

“I respect our president for banning gay parades. You have moral dissoluteness in the Western countries” (W40) and “I think the major difference is that people abroad are more individualistic, they care about themselves more than about others. In our society people help each other and are close to each other” (W60).

The last statement is in conformity with the socialist ideology, which criticizes capitalism for supporting selfish individuals and giving little or no care for others (Geoghean, 2003:75).

The comments above suggest that Belarusians could have their own values, which are different from the Western ones. Such elements, as homosexuality as a Western idea, Western individualism and alienation of the Western mentality support the relativist approach within the human rights concept. However, talking about this issue, one individual expresses a different idea, which illustrates the current human rights situation in Belarus and points in the direction of the universality of human rights: “Western society is more uninhibited. You can think and express your opinion freely there, like a human being. People have human rights there, which is not the case in Belarus” (M30-1). Additionally, two individuals (F52 and F40) state that modern Belarusians are increasingly occupied with material values like their profit, cars and apartments. These results suggest that individualist values are present in Belarusian society.

Interestingly, none of the interviewees mentions liberalist values, like human rights, political obligation, justice, equality, democracy, and liberty (Freeden and Stears, 2013), which suggests that these elements are less important or non-existent for the interviewees. These findings match those by UNDP (2017). According to UNDP (2017), only 24 percent of Belarusians mention human rights, and 20 percent - democracy amongst their values, when asked about the most important values for a good citizen. The values, which the majority of Belarusians (45 percent) consider most important is adherence to the law. Thirty-two percent of the respondents believe that tolerance is the most important value and 24 percent mention order and security (UNDP, 2017). These findings are largely in agreement with the data provided by the research “Annual survey report: Belarus – 3rd wave” (EU Neighbors East, 2018). The majority of Belarusians (61 percent) refer to peace, security and stability as their most important personal values and 41 percent of the population mention human rights among their values. As UNDP (2017) and EU Neighbors East (2018) mostly support the qualitative interview results, these findings can be moderately extrapolated to a larger part of the Belarusian population.

The findings presented above suggest that liberal values, such as human rights and democracy, are not among the most important values for the majority of Belarusians. A possible explanation for these results may be contained in the statement of one interviewee:

Our values are more material in character. The most important difference is the economic factor. How can people think about anything else, like freedoms and human rights when they do not have enough money for living (M30-1)?

In summary, it could be thus suggested that such elements as security, stability and the economic factor reflect socialist values, which were the basis of economic, social and cultural rights, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Murphy, 1972). Accordingly, Belarusians' values mentioned above seem to be in agreement with socio-economic rights rather than civil and political rights. It is important to note, that caution must be applied when analyzing the results from this section, as not all the qualitative interview findings are supported by secondary data and thus could not be transferable to the opinion of a larger group of the Belarusian population.

### **5.1.2 Ideology: communism, liberalism and collective values**

The overall response to the question about the main elements of the Belarusian ideology is poor. Only one interviewee has an idea of what the Belarusian ideology might be: “It is an effort to build the communist society on the ruins of the USSR, an unsuccessful attempt to keep power” (M30-1). This assertion could be compared with the statement of president Lukashenka:

Communist ideology is the closest and the most understandable ideology to our people. The failure of the socialist experiment does not mean that the communist ideas are dead. These ideas ... are based on the principle of equality and social justice. Our country has lived almost the entire twentieth century with the communist worldview... Communist ideology, based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology, should become one of the main components of the Belarusian state ideology (Lukashenka, 2012).

Additionally, according to Lukashenka, the ideology of liberalism is the most dominant and extremely aggressive ideology. Liberal and neoliberal values like strong individualism, lack

of spirituality, willingness to live in a constant race for profit, and social inequality of people are deeply alien to Belarusian people (Lukashenka, 2003). Lukashenka speaks of “liberal terror,” which the Western civilization attempts to enforce on other countries, claiming that their own model is the only correct example of development (Lukashenka, 2003).

Consequently, Belarusian society should develop according to their own cultural tradition, rather than copy foreign values and ideas (Lukashenka, 2003). These statements are in accordance with the previous studies within cultural relativism and in particular with claims of Asian leaders about Western individualism and liberalism being incompatible with their cultures (Haas, 2014). Further, Lukashenka claims that the state ideology of Belarus should focus on Belarusian values, such as mutual aid, patriotism, collectivism as opposed to Western individualism, social justice and respectful relations between the state and the people, which are the principles of their former communist ideology (Lukashenka, 2003).

Lukashenka’s statement mentioned above was the base of the discussion with five of the interviewees. In particular, they argued whether the specific features of the Belarusian mentality are collectivism, patriotism and social justice. Over a half of those interviewed (W60, W42 and W22) express their complete agreement with the statement of the president. M50-2 partially agrees and states that only patriotism is a typical feature of the Belarusian mentality and is unsure about the other elements. Additionally, M30-1 states:

We still have patriotism, but it is enforced by the state. Collectivism is an important feature, which is typical for Belarusian society, our society cannot exist without collectivism, and it will not survive without it. Our existence is not possible without collectivism.

This statement supports both socialist and communist ideas about the individual as a social being, which is an indivisible part of society, and that there is no concept of a singular independent individual in these ideologies (Murphy, 1972).

These findings suggest, that the state attempts to build an ideology based on communist values and to some degree succeeds to enforce this ideology on the population, as the interviewees partially or completely agree with the statement of the president. However, due to the small number of interviewees, these results should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized.

### **5.1.3 Society versus individual**

If we turn again to the idea of collectivism, the majority of the interviewees support the view that the well-being of society is more important than the well-being of individuals and one must give up his or her own interests for the sake of the collective, which again suggests the prevalence of collectivist attitudes. The statements below illustrate this:

To some degree, individual interests should be less important than the interests of society. We need this for reaching the common aim. We sacrifice our private interests and life for the sake of our society (W22).

Well-being of society is more important in our country, because we still have a couple of generations who grew up in the Soviet Union and these values are important to them. However, the younger generation has different values. I would say that individualism is more important to our young people (M30-1).

The interests of society should be more important, no doubt. When all people are united, our society stays strong. The interests of society should always be more important. If you are individualist and all by yourself, you will sooner or later need help from society, you will not be able to exist alone (M62).

The last assertion seems to be consistent with the idea of Anderson (1995), mentioned in the theory chapter, which suggests that according to collectivists, the well-being of an individual depends on society. Unsuccessful individuals, who need assistance from the collective, will not be able to survive in the individualistic society (Anderson, 1995).

However, five interviewees stress that interests of society and interests of individuals should have equal importance. At the same time, two of them accept that in specific cases individual interests should be less important, as for example:

I think if your society demands, you have to abide, for example, you have to sacrifice your weekend and go to work if it is needed. In this case, your interests are less important than the interests of society (W24).

Furthermore, according to “Belarus between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union: A National Values Survey 2016” (Korosteleva, 2016), the values which respondents consider typical for Belarusians are a mix of liberal and socialist values such as peace and stability, multiculturalism, tolerance, and cultural heritage. In addition, the respondents do not refer to democracy as a value, but rather prioritize stability, security and protection.

Taken together, these results suggest that the elements of collectivism are still typical in Belarusian society. These findings corroborate the ideas of the authors of “Foundations of the Ideology of the Belarusian state” Babosov (2013) and Jaskevich (2013) who claim that collectivism is something national, something that is in Belarusians’ blood, and something that should be kept and strengthened (Babosov, 2013). The typical values of Belarusians are collectivism and orientation to Eurasian socio-collectivistic rather than Western individualistic values. For Belarusians, the most important element is not a separate individual, but a collective, where solidarity and mutual aid are paramount (Jaskevich 2013).

Interestingly, one unanticipated finding is that opinions of the interviewees vary substantially by age. The older generations, those who grew up in the USSR (40-60 age group), are more likely to agree that many of the communist values mentioned above are typical for Belarusian society. The younger generation (20-30 age group) seems to think differently and is moving away from these traditional collectivist values. As one interviewee notes (M30-1), Belarusian values are changing as a new generation comes of age and that many young people of his age may have individualistic values. M30-2 has a similar opinion and states that it is impossible to convince his parents to abandon their “Soviet way of thinking”.

It must be noted that not all the findings can be extrapolated to a larger part of Belarusians, as they are generated from qualitative interviews alone. Nevertheless, some socialist values, like stability, security and protection supported by National Values Survey by Korosteleva (2016) and the official Belarusian ideology, could be moderately extrapolated to a larger part of the Belarusian population.



### 5.1.4 Community labor

According to president Lukashenka, participation in community labor without expecting material rewards for the benefit of society is a typical feature of Belarusian culture and the ideology (Lukashenka, 2003). The beliefs of the majority of the interviewees do not disprove the idea of the president. The majority of those interviewed express their support to compulsory unpaid national workdays. The interviewees believe that community labor is paramount for the well-being of society, it is useful for both individuals and society and it should be embedded in their society. For example, one individual comments:

... In general I have a positive attitude to compulsory unpaid community labor. In our collective no one ever refuses to be involved in it, it is important to work for the well-being of our society. We have subbotnik<sup>2</sup> once a year and it is not enough, we should have more of them (W42).

And another one puts in: "We have always participated in subbotniks. Labor unites us and we have fun doing something positive for our society at the same time" (W22). Interestingly, only two individuals (M50-2 and M33) are completely negative to compulsory unpaid national workdays, and a small number of those interviewed (W24, M30-1 and M62) state that they only support voluntary community labor. As one interviewee notes: "It depends what kind of labor. If it is for hospitals and orphanages – I agree that we should have it. If it is an order from above – I disagree" (M30-1).

At the same time, Babosov (2013) supports the idea of community labor. According to him, Belarusian citizens should be ready and able to work efficiently, not only for their own well-being, but also for the well-being of their homeland (Babosov, 2013). Babosov (2013) connects Belarusian values to their historical concept of "toloka" – mutual collective labor of community members and defines labor as the source of all values and joy in life.

Later we discussed the issue concerning the money earned on subbotniks being withheld from workers' wages and used for social needs. Surprisingly, the majority of the interviewees feel

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<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet Union: a day, typically a Saturday, worked without pay for the benefit of the collective (English Oxford Living Dictionaries).

positive about it, if they know where money goes. They support the use of the money for the needs of the society, like hospitals and orphanages. As one participant comments:

I am positive to it if the money is used for the needs of the community. We paid money from our scholarship for the needs of our society and I was positive to that. Because it is for our own needs and our well-being. For myself, my own well-being (W22).

The evidence presented in this section suggests that positive attitudes to compulsory unpaid national workdays are predominant among the interviewees, which could be seen as a collective value. Although individualist ideas become more typical for the younger generation, this age group still supports compulsory unpaid community labor.

In the view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that collectivist attitudes and relativism rather than universalism is more typical for Belarusian society. However, as the results in this section are based on the opinion of the interviewees, they cannot be extrapolated to a larger part of Belarusians.

## **5.2 The perspectives on human rights and human rights situation in the country**

### **5.2.1 Human rights attitudes**

I have discussed with ten of the interviewees the statement taken from The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which articulates that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms, without the distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or status (UN, 1948). The overall response to this issue is very positive. The majority of the interviewees agree that all people are equal and should have equal rights, which supports the idea of the universality of human rights. This finding agrees with the research conducted by Freedom House (2016). According to Freedom house (2016), the majority of Belarusians agree with the statement that human rights are acquired by birth (93.0 percent) and are universal (86.3 percent).

However, the mood among the interviewees changes after they are asked a question about gay rights. Only two interviewees state that they would support the rights of this group of people. The absolute majority of the interviewees express their negative attitude toward gay people. A common view amongst these interviewees is that homosexuality should not exist and it is a psychological illness that should be cured. Furthermore, some interviewees claim that gay people should stay underground without demanding their rights, they should not have the right to their way of life and one cannot enforce homosexuality on Belarusian society. Additionally, two interviewees mention that they have negative attitude to Muslims and they are not sure whether they should have the same rights as other people. While agreeing that Roma people should have equal rights, two other interviewees state that this group of people should be forced to work like everyone else and they should change their way of life.

The fact that homosexuality is not seen as a part of Belarusian culture, claims about denying gay people their rights and negative attitude to Muslims and Roma people suggest that the interviewees' attitudes to human rights might not be in conformity with the universality of human rights. As mentioned in the theory chapter, the main idea of the universality of human rights is that all human beings have equal rights and no groups, or categories of people should be deprived of human rights (Spagnoli, 2007).

Further, in response to the question: "Upholding of which rights is most important to you?", most of those interviewed have a common view. Whilst a minority mentions the right to vote and freedom of speech, all agree that respecting the right to work and the right to a fair wage are the most important rights. Only one interviewee, who is a lawyer (M50-2), alludes to the idea of importance of respecting all rights, as all rights have equal significance. A common view among the interviewees is that that employment and good wage are of greater significance for them, as one cannot achieve an appropriate standard of living without these factors. The findings observed in this section mirror those of the UNDP (2017) research. The majority of the rights Belarusians refer to are social and economic rights, while the only non-socio-economic right, which is mentioned, is the right to life. According to the UNDP (2017) report, the most frequently mentioned rights by Belarusians are the right to life (50 percent), the right to work (49 percent), the right to education (30 percent) and the right to healthcare (20 percent) (UNDP, 2017). In addition, the respondents are convinced that the government should grant these rights to the citizens. Overall, the most important right to Belarusians is the right to work, and the respondents believe that it is the obligation of the government to

provide its citizens with employment (UNDP 2017). Furthermore, according to the UNDP (2017) report, Belarusians do not emphasize political rights. The respondents mention electoral rights, freedom of association and freedom of expression occasionally and mostly when they are talking about infringement of these rights. These results match the findings from the qualitative interview research, where the only non-socio-economic rights mentioned are freedom of speech and the right to vote.

In summary, it could be suggested that Belarusians' express their support for socio-economic rights, while giving less prominence to civil and political rights. Thus, their attitudes toward civil and political rights seem to point in the direction of cultural relativism, as cultural relativists did not emphasize and even oppose this category of rights (Haas, 2014). These findings suggest that Belarusians inherited this thinking from the paternalistic Soviet Union (UNDP, 2017). As mentioned in the theory chapter, these views are inherent to the socialist ideology, as the socialist countries sought to promote socio-economic rights (Murphy, 1972), while civil and political rights were considered less significant (Haas, 2014).

The findings from this section can be extrapolated to a larger part of the Belarusian population as various data sources are used to analyze the issue.

### **5.2.2 The assessment of the human rights situation in Belarus**

Seven of the interviewees have never experienced violations of their rights, and six of them say they did. The list of rights violations includes an unfair trial and workers' rights.

The qualitative interview findings are consistent with those of the Freedom House report (2016): a large majority of the respondents (83.5 percent) state that their own rights have never been violated. The list of rights violations include theft, extortion, assault, and the violation of workers' rights. Only 16.5 percent of the respondents say they have experienced violations of their rights mentioned above (Freedom House, 2016). A possible explanation for these results may be a gap in the knowledge on human rights in general and a human rights situation in the country.

Further, we discussed the state of democracy in Belarus. Table 2 shows an overview of the interviewees' opinion on democracy in the country:

**Table 2: Democracy in Belarus**

N	Interviewee	What can you say about democracy in your country?
1	W42	I do not know what democracy means, but we have elections, we vote and everything is fine.
2	W60	I do not know. I am not interested in politics. The most important for me is that our politics is directed to maintain peace and friendly relationships between our neighboring countries. I am satisfied with the political situation in the country.
3	M50-1	We do not have democracy in our country.
4	M33	We do not have democracy in our country.
5	W52	Difficult to say. Our population has a good standard of living; everyone has a car.
6	W24	I have no idea.
7	W22	We have elections. We have elected our president, we have expressed our wish, our opinion.
8	M50	It is practically absent.
9	M30-1	It does not exist in our country.
10	W23	What is democracy?
11	M30-2	We did not know the meaning of this word 10 years ago. We have freedom and it is all right now, you can do what you want. You can go out freely as we have security.
12	W40	I do not understand what this word means. What does democracy in Belarus mean? I do not know.
13	M62	We have it to some degree, but this term is unclear to us. We have never learned anything about democracy in the USSR, we studied Scientific Communism and the History of the Communist party.

Though a few interviewees are convinced that democracy in their country is non-existent, the meaning of the term of democracy is unclear for the majority. Two interviewees mention that the population expresses their opinion through elections. Interestingly, W52 interprets democracy as a good standard of living and M30-2 as security. These findings suggest the existence of an alternative understanding of the term democracy among the interviewees, which might conform to cultural relativism. Furthermore, inability to define the term suggests, that democracy, as a value, might not be an essential attribute of Belarusian culture. As noted in the theory chapter, Makei (2013) claims that democracy and human rights are Western values, as they originate from the historical development of Europe.

According to “Annual survey report: Belarus – 3rd wave” (EU Neighbors East, 2018),

over 40 percent of Belarusians are ‘fairly’ (39 percent) or ‘very’ (3 percent) satisfied with the state of democracy in Belarus. Interestingly, positive evaluations of how democracy works in Belarus have increased by 11 percentage points since 2017. According to the majority of Belarusians, virtually all assessed democratic indicators apply to their country. For example, gender equality exists in their country for 75 percent of Belarusians, the rule of law for 66 percent, respect for human rights for 60 percent, good governance for 56 percent, freedom of the media for 55 percent, free and fair elections for 54 percent, independence of the judiciary system for 54 percent, freedom of speech for 53 percent and protection of the rights of minorities for 53 percent. A possible explanation for these results may be either a gap in the knowledge on the topic of democracy and human rights among Belarusians or an alternative interpretation of the meaning of democracy and human rights, which could be in agreement with cultural relativism.

Further, I investigated interviewees’ opinion on the state of human rights in Belarus. The table below illustrates the results:

**Table 3: Human rights situation in the country**

N	Interviewee	How would you assess the human rights situation in your country?
1	W42	Our people have their rights in Belarus. The human rights situation is very satisfactory. Everyone has a job, free education.
2	W60	I cannot say anything about it. I am illiterate in terms of human rights, like the rest of the population. We do not know anything about our rights and about the legislation in our country.
3	M50-1	Human rights are mostly respected, I would say 80 percent.
4	M33	It is an ambiguous question, it seems that human rights are respected; we can protect our rights in the courts, if we are harassed. However, if you are on trial against the state – you will lose and will not be able to prove anything. People in power have their rights, but not the ordinary people.
5	W52	I have never experienced anything of the kind (rights violations). You do not involve in anything – and everything is fine. If you involve – you will get physical punishment.
6	W24	I have no idea.
7	W22	Human rights are respected.
8	M50-2	The situation is satisfactory. However, there are cases of human rights violations. Our legislation looks good on paper, but it works only partially.
9	M30-1	There are large-scale human rights violations.
10	W23	Our rights are violated just to protect the rights of the authorities. It does not help to complain about it.
11	M30-2	The situation is stable and we do not have any violations of human rights. Everything is normal. The only thing is that our economic situation is dire.
12	W40	Sometimes the rights are violated, like in the cases when you carry the white-red-white flag. The police or KGB <sup>3</sup> arrests you.
13	M62	I do not think that human rights situation in Belarus is worse than in the USA. In the USA, they defame and offend the president. We have rights in our country.

In response to the question “What rights are violated most in Belarus?”, five individuals state that they do not have any knowledge on the issue. Other responses to this question include the following suggestions: freedom of expression, the right to work, the right to a fair wage and the right to a private life. One individual states that all rights are violated, without being able to give a detailed explanation on the issue (M30-1). Interestingly, president Lukashenka claims that Belarus adheres to the basic principles of international law and in his opinion, the democracy and human rights situation Belarus are “not at all worse” than in the European Union (Lukashenka, 2017).

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<sup>3</sup> The state security police (English Oxford Living Dictionaries).

My findings are mostly consistent with those of Freedom House (2016). Among the rights, which are violated most in the country, the respondents mention workers' rights, the right to a fair wage and freedom of expression. In addition, a list of less respected rights include freedom to strike, freedom of assembly, the right to a guaranteed minimum standard of living, and the right to elect and control authorities (Freedom House, 2016). The data reported here appears to support the assumption that political rights concern Belarusians less than socio-economic rights.

Overall, these results seem to indicate, that the majority of the interviewees are convinced that human rights in Belarus are not violated or only occasionally violated. Only one interviewee (M30-1) seems to be aware of human rights violations in the country. Even though two other interviewees state that human rights are violated in Belarus, they are not able to exemplify the issue. My findings suggest that the majority of the interviewees have gaps in their knowledge on human rights and human rights violations in their country, which makes them feel positive about the human rights situation in Belarus. The results from both the Freedom House (2016) and the UNDP (2017) reports support this idea. When the respondents talk about the violation of their rights, they state that "all rights are violated" and are not able to provide any more detail on the issue (UNDP, 2017). In addition, according to Freedom House (2016), the topic of human rights is not an easy one for the citizens of Belarus. Belarusians do not have a clear idea of what human rights are, but mention freedom of expression along with obedience to the law and social guarantees. Moreover, Belarusians have remarkable gaps in their knowledge on the state structure, regulatory framework, and citizens' rights and duties (UNDP, 2017).

It can thus be suggested that there exists an interrelationship between the gap of Belarusians' knowledge on human rights and relativism, as relativists do not consider human rights as an integral part of non-Western cultures (Haas, 2014). It is critical to note, that the findings from this section can be extrapolated to a larger part of the Belarusian population, as the secondary data confirms the findings generated from qualitative interviews.

### **5.2.3 Freedom of expression**

A variety of perspectives are expressed while discussing freedom of expression in Belarus. For three interviewees freedom of expression is present in Belarus or the situation is getting better. Two of them comment, that employees can express their opinion freely to their employer at the workplace (W42 and W60), which suggests the existence of an alternative



understanding of the concept. Three interviewees say that they are not sure, which suggests that they do not have knowledge on freedom of expression in the country and are not interested in the issue. Two interviewees assess the state of freedom of expression as unsatisfactory, while five individuals describe the situation as dire. They state that there is no freedom of expression in their country and that the population does not know the truth. For example, two interviewees comment:

All the websites critical to authorities and president are constantly closed and we do not know the truth. The media reports that the life is bad in the Western countries and good in our country. The Western countries are criticized and the people believe, especially our older generation (M30-2).

The situation of freedom of expression is unsatisfactory. We have freedom in the kitchen – we can talk about everything there. Even in Russia, the authorities are criticized on TV. Our channels do not show anything critical to the regime (M62).

Six of thirteen interviewees are aware of the fact that the media is controlled by the state and are negative on the issue. Other interviewees state that they do not know anything about it or never think about it. However, one participant comments: “This (the control of the media by the state) exists everywhere. You need to filter information anyway. We have to abide the state ideology” (W22).

Interestingly, when asked about their opinion on the criminal code articles, which include defamation and insult of the president and insult of public officials, the majority of the interviewees support the existence of these articles. Only one individual out of ten expresses his negative attitude to this issue. However, in response to the question: “What is your attitude toward the harassment of journalists in Belarus?” most of those interviewed say that it is unacceptable and journalists should not be harassed. Nevertheless, half of the interviewees have never heard about the harassment of journalists in their country. A few of the interviewees feel that they do not have knowledge on the issue, while others comment that they have heard about the harassment of journalists in other countries, like Ukraine. Surprisingly, one individual even accepts that journalists might be harassed, depending on what they write. Only three interviewees have heard something about the cases of the

harassment of journalists in their country, and one notes that he does not know the truth about it.

Overall, the results from this section point in two directions: on one hand, the findings support the universalist approach within the human rights concept as the majority of the interviewees are aware of the infringement of the freedom of expression and do not support the harassment of journalists. On the other hand, one can trace the elements of relativism as six of the interviewees either feel positive about the state of freedom of expression in their country, or cannot express any opinion on the issue. Additionally, almost all interviewees support the criminal code articles on defamation and insult of the president and public officials. As mentioned in the theory chapter, one of the principles of relativism is interpretation and application of human rights depending upon the cultural and political characteristics of a specific country (Donoho, 1991). In this case the prohibition on defamation and insulting the president and public officials might not be seen as infringement of freedom of expression, as respect for authority is one of the inherent elements of many non-Western cultures (Spagnoli, 2007).

#### **5.2.4 Freedom of assembly**

Most interviewees support the possibility of peaceful demonstrations and are negative to restrictions on demonstrations and the harassment of demonstrators, which supports the idea of the universality of human rights. However, two interviewees are negative to demonstrations and claim that they do not need demonstrations in their society. As one participant comments:

I am against demonstrations. I do not understand why people organize demonstrations. Those who do not want to work participate in demonstrations. I do not understand why people do it. We do not need them (W42).

These two individuals consider freedom of assembly as an alien element to Belarusian society, which only creates disorder. These statements seem to be in conformity with human rights related relativism as freedom of assembly is considered as a Western element, which opposes such relativist values as harmony and discipline (Spagnoli, 2007). Two other interviewees mention that they support a ban on gay demonstrations. As mentioned earlier,

these statements seem to support cultural relativism, as the interviewees support the denial of gay rights.

### **5.2.5 Workers rights**

The interviewees express a variety of perspectives concerning workers' rights issues in Belarus. Three divergent discourses emerge while discussing this issue: three interviewees claim that workers' rights are completely respected in Belarus. Four other individuals note that workers' rights are partially respected, and the situation is not so bad, although they cannot provide a detailed explanation of the issue. Six interviewees state that workers' rights are infringed in their country. According to them, the infringement of workers' rights is connected to fixed-term contracts, working hours and unemployment.

Surprisingly, the majority of the interviewees are not negative to the fixed-term contract system in their country. Six of ten interviewees are positive toward fixed-term contracts and do not believe that this system violates their rights. As two interviewees suggest: "There is nothing wrong with this system. An employee works and earns money and all these contracts are in conformity with our legislation" (M50-2).

I have a positive attitude to fixed-term contracts. An employer can assess me, whether or not I am suitable for the position in his company. This system is good for choosing the most qualified specialist (W22).

One interviewee gives an interesting comment:

If you do not like the situation of workers' rights at your workplace – you are free to leave, as there will be many people willing to have your job. Rights do not matter in this case. It is difficult to find a good job, so people keep silent and do not demand anything (M30-2).

However, the majority of the interviewees are not satisfied with labor unions in their country. They note that labor unions do not provide any assistance to workers but cooperate with employers. The most common statements related to interviewees' attitudes to labor unions are: "Labor unions assist employees when they have an advantage of doing so" (W52);

“...they are state labor unions and support the state” (M50-2); “...the only help we get from them is New Year presents for our children” (M33). Only one interviewee is positive to labor unions: “...they cover 50 percent of summer camp price for workers’ children” (W42).

In sum, these findings suggest the existence of two conflicting ideas concerning workers’ rights: on one hand almost half of the interviewees are aware of the fact that workers’ rights are not respected, like the labor unions example, which points in the direction of universal human rights thinking. On the other hand, one might trace the elements of cultural relativism, such as overall satisfaction with fix-term contracts, which might be the interviewees’ own interpretation of application of these rights (Donoho, 1991).

### **5.2.6 Forced labor**

A common view of the interviewees is that forced labor does not exist in their country. At the same time, they approve of forced labor in one way or another. The most typical comments are: “I am positive to student community labor, labor is useful for everyone. But we have never had forced labor, student labor is voluntary, and all labor is paid” (W22).

We do not have forced labor as all labor is paid, so you have to work. Anyway, I have a positive attitude to this, why shouldn’t you help society? You have to work for the well-being of our society (W62).

Only three interviewees out of ten express their negative attitude to forced labor. However, paradoxically, all of them support the idea that the groups of population who lead the asocial way of life should be forced to work. Interestingly, all thirteen interviewees are convinced that marginalized groups of society, like alcoholics, prostitutes, homeless and Roma people should be involved in forced labor. The interviewees note that this group of people should be forced to work because the state supports them, they should be useful for society and it is for their own well-being. In addition, eight of twelve interviewees are positive toward the medical labor centers.

The most typical answers are: “It is fair, a person is living a life, and the state supports this person. To make this person work is for the well-being of society and it is useful for society” (M30). “I am positive to it, there should be centers where they should be involved in labor

therapy and their freedoms should be restricted. And we will not have asocial groups of people anymore” (W40). Another interviewee comments:

I agree that we should have medical labor centers for this group of people as they should get used to labor, but the conditions should be human, not like in prison. They have to work and they should be forced to work, or rather persuaded to work. They use our welfare system, but do not contribute to the society (M62).

Interestingly, only one individual (M50-1) suggests that medical labor centers are a violation of human rights. Overall, these results seem to suggest the presence of relativism within the interviewees’ human rights thinking. First, the idea that marginalized groups of society should be deprived of their rights and involved in forced labor is not in conformity with the universality of human rights. As human rights are “universal” rights and everyone is “universally” entitled to these rights, without any discrimination (Haas, 2014). Second, the fact that forced labor seems to be considered an obligation, and not a violation of human rights might indicate an alternative interpretation of the concept of rights, which is another element of relativism (Donoho, 1991). However, it is important to bear in mind that the results concerning violation of specific rights, like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, workers’ rights and forced labor are not transferable to a larger part of the Belarusian citizens, as there are no other data sources which can validate the qualitative interview findings.

## **5.3 The aspects of the social contract in Belarus**

### **5.3.1 The material and welfare related benefits**

In this section, I examine the interviewees’ degree of overall satisfaction with their life, and their attitudes to the material and welfare benefits of the social contract. To generate the data, I had a few questions regarding the interviewees’ overall satisfaction with their life, their attitudes toward their country in general and their feelings about giving up freedoms in order to achieve stability and order. The main question required the interviewees to provide the information about what they are satisfied with and not satisfied with in their life. The results are organized in table 4:

**Table 4: Overall, can you tell me about the level of satisfaction with your life?**

N	Interviewee	What are you satisfied with?	What are you not satisfied with?
1	F42	My job and working hours, the living standard. Security, safety, kind people. Paid maternity leave.	The wage is too low.
2	F60	Everything. The possibility to work despite being retiree. Enough money for living.	Nothing.
3	M50-1	Working for a non-state company, there is no war, our country is clean and we have good roads.	Low wage; the population is robbed by the state, high taxes and other fees.
4	M33	Friends, family, good relationships with my friends and my family.	Our legislation, the ministry of internal affairs, and its employees, the police. Too high taxes, fines and fees, too many of them.
5	F52	Everything. I was not satisfied with my employer, so I found another job.	Nothing.
6	F24	Everything, my job, my colleagues, my wage.	Nothing.
7	F22	That I have graduated from the university, the possibility of employment.	The wage, it is too low, too expensive to rent an apartment.
8	M50-2	Overall satisfied with my life, social conditions, my apartment and my network.	My financial situation.
9	M30-1	The quality of the food products.	The state has an absolute power, no possibilities for development and self-determination for an ordinary person. Poverty and inequality among the population.
10	F23	My town, events and festivals in my town, clean towns and cities, clean, attractive public areas.	The situation in the country, the legislation; our work conditions, unmanageable tasks at work, too much work to do, low wage.
11	M30-2	My family, children and that I have a roof under my head.	The economic situation in Belarus.
12	F40	My job, my wage and my family. Positive and satisfied with my life.	KGB, how it operates, no access to information, no truth. Absence of possibility to identify ourselves as Belarusians.
13	M62	Everything, I have a worthy respectable life, enough money.	The living conditions – our apartments.

The results shown above match those of Freedom House (2016) and thus can be extrapolated to a larger part of the Belarusian population. According to Freedom House (2016), Belarusians do not prioritize human rights violations problems, which mostly agrees with the comments of the interviewees. The only exception is M30-1, who notes that he is not satisfied with the absolute power of the state and the lack of personal self-determination. According to Freedom House (2016), Belarusians have a number of other issues to worry about, rather than

prioritize human rights. First, a matter of interest and importance for the population are social and economic issues, such as unemployment, illegal dismissals and social insecurity. Similarly, the interviewees are mostly concerned with economic issues: low wages, high taxes, fees, and the unsatisfactory financial situation. Moreover, according to the report, Belarusians are occupied with the issues of corruption, arbitrariness of the police, and the officials' incompetence in responding to their complaints (Freedom House, 2016). The sources of dissatisfaction of some of the interviewees are similar: the legislation, the ministry of internal affairs and its employees and the police.

The findings show that the majority of the interviewees seem to be satisfied with their life. Speaking about the elements they are dissatisfied with, the interviewees mention most frequently their financial standing. Only five interviewees out of thirteen express their discontent with the state, the legislation or KGB, and for one of them (F23) this dissatisfaction is connected to her own employment. Interestingly, those who are less satisfied with their life and mention their discontent with the state, the organs of internal affairs and the legislation are young people – M33, M30-1 and F23, with the exception of M50-1. Additionally, according to “Annual survey report: Belarus – 3rd wave” (EU Neighbors East, 2018), 45 percent of the population feel positive about the future of Belarus and 51 percent about their personal future. A possible explanation for these results may be that a large group of Belarusians is still satisfied with their life and the regime.

In summary, these results point in two directions. On one hand, a few interviewees are dissatisfied with the state, which suggests that they are aware of the issues connected to the political situation in Belarus. On the other hand, the majority of the interviewees do not seem to show their concern about the political situation in their country. A possible explanation to this could be their satisfaction with the regime and unawareness of existing human rights issues in Belarus, or their alternative interpretation of human rights. Additionally, it is crucial to note that giving greater prominence to socio-economic rights rather than political and civil rights is characteristic of communist and socialist ideologies, rather than Western liberalism (Haas, 2014).

### 5.3.2 The non-material benefits

In response to the question “What most of all makes you proud of your country and what makes you feel shame and regret?” a range of interesting responses was elicited. Table 5 illustrates the results:

**Table 5: What makes you proud of your country, and what makes you feel shame and regret?**

N	Interviewee	What makes you proud of your country?	What makes you feel shame and regret?
1	F60	Stability, clean towns, no criminality, our children are safe.	Couples living together without being married.
2	F42	Our helpful and kind-hearted people.	I am not ashamed of anything.
3	M50-1	Our country is clean. Nothing more. I am proud of Russia, Russians, Russia’s armament and that they surpassed the Americans. That the Crimea became Russian.	Our president. He is selling the land to foreigners, without asking the population. He does not secure a good standard of living for his population.
4	M33	That I am Belarusian, our patriotism and that I was born in the USSR.	Difficult to say.
5	F52	Kind-hearted, helpful people.	The authorities, they are incompetent.
6	F24	We have a clean country and beautiful nature.	The people in other countries do not know anything about Belarus.
7	F22	Our life, peaceful country, peaceful politics, the state is helpful to young people.	Lack of knowledge on Belarus abroad.
8	M50-2	The history of our country.	Our flag and coat of arms, as it is a former communist symbolic.
9	M30-1	Our nature, our forests, marshes.	The standard of living of our population, our Soviet mentality, inherited from the USSR, corruption.
10	F23	Our history and especially the Great Patriotic War.	Our working conditions - unmanageable tasks and too much work to do for little money.
11	M30-2	Our history, the Great Patriotic War, stability.	The absence of economic development in our country, standstill, like in Stone Age.
12	F40	Our nature, modernization of agriculture, villages and agrotowns, our profound people, our science and culture.	The absence of access to information in archives, the legislation, impunity.
13	M62	Our people, our ancestors, our origin.	We do not know our history.



Overall, my findings suggest, that the interviewees seem to be proud of their country. The most often mentioned reasons of pride are the Belarusian people, their history and nature, a clean country as well as stability, which constitute ideological constructs of the social contract (Haiduk et al., 2009). What concerns their country, two interviewees feel that there is nothing to be ashamed of. Two other interviewees are ashamed of the gap in the knowledge on Belarus abroad, and one mentions lack of knowledge on their own history, which are also the elements of ideological constructs. Only two interviewees mention that they are ashamed of the president or the authorities, and another two individuals mention economic factors. An interesting point of view is expressed by M30-1, as he states that he is ashamed of the survival of the Soviet mentality with the elements of communism (M30-1). Another interviewee states that there is nothing to be proud of about Belarus, except for cleanness (M50-1). However, paradoxically, this individual expresses his warm approval and pride of Russia.

Surprisingly, despite criticizing the Belarusian regime, M50-1 and M50-2 express their support for Putin. M50-1: “I support Putin. The situation on human rights in Russia is much better than in Belarus. Much better than in the USA. They have freedom of expression and so on.” M50-2: “I have a positive attitude toward Putin. He made his country strong, powerful, and everyone respects Russia both at home and abroad. I would like to have such president in Belarus.”

There are a number of similarities between my findings and the research published by “Social contracts in contemporary Belarus” by Haiduk, et al. (2009). When asked what they connect statement “It is great to live in Belarus” to, Belarusians mention the following elements most frequently: beautiful nature (34.2 percent), kind, sympathetic people (29.7 percent), political stability (17.0 percent), construction and redevelopment of towns and villages (16.8 percent) and security (11.8 percent) (Haiduk et al., 2009). Equally, the interviewees refer to all these elements: the Belarusian nature and the people are mentioned thrice, stability is mentioned twice, one individual mentions security and another one mentions the modernization of towns and villages. Table 6 illustrates the findings by Haiduk et al. (2009).

**Table 6: When you last thought, “It is great to live in Belarus”, what was it connected with (Haiduk et al., 2009)?**

	%
High administrative competence	6,3
Strong state	5,7
High-quality secondary education	6,0
High-quality higher education	6,5
Kind sympathetic people	29,7
High living standards	0,8
Financial stability	4,2
Political stability	17,0
Security, no crime	11,8
No arbitrary treatment by officials	1,9
Sports achievements	6,6
Fair state	3,0
No unemployment	2,5
No poverty	5,6
Decent pensions	2,8
Beautiful nature	34,2
Good environmental situation	3,1
Construction, redevelopment of towns and villages	16,8
Housing construction	7,2
High-quality medical services	2,7
Developed manufacturing sector	5,3
I have never thought so	23,2

Together these findings provide important insights into the social contract system in Belarus, where ideological constructs play a crucial role. As mentioned in the theory chapter, they strengthen the positive image of the state: the ideas of patriotism, the strong state, the system of values, symbols, stereotypes and “social myths” (Haiduk et al., 2009:72). It is important to note, that the findings from this section cannot be transferred to a larger group of the Belarusian population, as they are based on qualitative interviews and data from Haiduk et al. (2009), which is a ten-year-old data. However, this data is valuable as it provides the insights into ideological constructs as a part of the social contract.

### **5.3.3 Stability and security as a part of the social contract**

The interview results suggest that the majority of the interviewees accept partial suppression of freedoms by the state to achieve security and stability in the country. The interviewees stress that order, stability and peace are of a supreme importance for them. One individual stresses, that despite dictatorship, they have stability in Belarus (M30-2). Another interviewee notes that sometimes one can achieve good results using the totalitarian means (W40).

A common view among the majority of the interviewees could be illustrated by the following comment:

I fully agree that the state should suppress freedoms for the sake of stability. I would like to have order and peace in our society, and I do not want strikes and demonstrations. Economic stability is the most important factor for me. If we have good wages, we will have a better life (W42).

At the same time, four interviewees are completely negative to the idea of suppressing freedoms by the state. As one interviewee notes:

The suppressing of freedoms is nonsense. We have exactly this happening in the country and I am negative to it. At the same time, stability is important for our population, especially after the events in Ukraine. Everyone started thinking about it, that stability is important (M30-1).

My findings are only partially consistent with those of Freedom House (2016). According to Freedom House (2016), the majority of Belarusians (51.5 percent) are ready to defend their rights, even if it goes against the interests of the state. A small part of the respondents (12.7 percent) agrees that in certain cases it is acceptable to give up individual rights for the sake of national interests. However, only a minority (10.2 percent) of respondents feels that individual rights must be placed higher than state interests.

Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees seem to prioritize order, peace and security rather than respect of human rights. Interestingly, the example of Ukraine is mentioned a number of times by the majority of the individuals throughout the interview process. The case of Ukraine is seen as a negative example: an unstable country split by war. The interviewees stress that they do not want the same occurring in Belarus. Additionally, one interviewee mentions Venezuela:

We had a friendly relationship with Venezuela before Chavez died. They have crisis now, look what is going on there – chaos, people are struggling to have enough food and there is a refugee crisis. When they had “a strong hand” – everything was fine and there was order in the country (M30-2).

My findings are similar to those of Freedom House (2016). According to the report, only a third of respondents (33.9 percent) consider it essential to prioritize human rights, meanwhile maintaining order in the country is of supreme importance for 52.1 percent of respondents (Freedom House, 2016). These results suggest that human rights issues are not of a supreme importance for Belarusians, which supports the relativist approach within the concept of human rights. In addition, it is almost certain that these results indicate a strong presence of the social contract in Belarus, as order, security, stability and “a life without war” determine the relations between Belarusians and the state (Haiduk et al., 2009).

Interestingly, the majority of the interviewees are also positive about the presence of a strong and authoritative leader, “a strong hand” in the country. One interviewee notes that weak leadership leads to anarchy (M50-1) and another one comments: “Belarus needs strong leadership because strong leadership results in stability and we need “a tsar<sup>4</sup>”, it is in our blood” (M30-2). The most typical response to the question is:

It should always be like this. I do not see any other option. The war in Ukraine influenced our population, I think. After the events in Ukraine, everyone voted for Lukashenka. Everyone is afraid of war and disorder (W62).

Only a minority of the participants is negative to the idea of a strong and authoritarian leader (M33 and M30), and one interviewee is ambivalent about the issue:

We have had a strong leader for twenty years and I am not positive to it. However, we are afraid of changes: what happens if another president is incompetent and unable to rule the country? Let it remain as it is. Our people need a dictatorship, otherwise they will be diluted and there will be chaos and anarchy, if democratic changes happen. We need to be oppressed to some degree, as this is a part of our culture and mentality (M62).

This statement suggests the prevalence of the relativist approach within human rights thinking, as relativists stress authoritarian power rather than democracy (Spagnoli, 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> An emperor of Russia before 1917 (English Oxford Living Dictionaries).

Babosov (2013) supports the opinion of the interviewees stressing that the fundamental feature of socio-economic development of the country is the construction and development of a strong and efficient state. Additionally, he states that only a strong and powerful state can prevent oligarchic lawlessness and the looting of the national wealth.

These findings suggest that the interviewees support the idea of a strong state and strong authoritarian leader, to achieve security, stability and order in the country. Even those who have a negative attitude to the regime stress the significance of these factors for the Belarusian population in general.

There are significant similarities between my findings concerning stability and security in the country and the results of the research published in Haiduk et al. (2009), which are illustrated in tables 7 and 8. According to table 7, the majority of Belarusians choose “rather agree” with the statements that suggest security, connected to employment, health care, education and business. At the same time, a significant minority of Belarusians “fully disagrees” with the statements. On average, 55.9 percent of Belarusians choose “fully agree” and “rather agree” with five statements presented in the table 7, in comparison to 34.5 percent who “rather disagree” or “fully disagree”. These results suggest that stability factors are of greater significance for the majority of Belarusians.

**Table 7: To what degree do you agree with the following (Haiduk et al., 2009)?**

	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Fully disagree	NA
1. It is better to have lower wages, but have a guaranteed job	16,3	41,8	26,5	9,6	5,8
2. It is better to have to have medium-quality health services, but free of charge	13,8	38,6	32,2	11,3	4,0
3. It is better to assign jobs to university graduates in order not to leave them unemployed	15,8	36,7	24,9	10,1	12,4
4. It is better to work for a state-owned enterprise than for a private firm	23,3	34,3	20,7	8,7	13,0
5. It is better to have Belarusian enterprises gain moderate profits than sell them to foreigners	24,1	35,2	21,5	7,1	12,1

According to table 8, the majority of Belarusians (34.2 percent) “rather agree” with the statement, which suggests that certain restrictions on human rights and democracy are

acceptable in order to achieve peace and stability. Only 9.1 percent of respondents fully disagree with the statement. In sum, 45.5 percent Belarusians “fully agree” and “rather agree” with the statement in comparison to 35 percent who “rather disagree” and “fully disagree” (Haiduk, et al., 2009).

**Table 8: There is an opinion: “The state ensures civil peace and political stability, and this justifies certain restrictions on democracy and freedom of speech”. To what extent do you agree? (Haiduk, et al., 2009)**

	Number of respondents	%
Fully agree	178	11.3
Rather agree	539	34.2
Rather disagree	409	25.9
Fully disagree	144	9.1
No answer/Undecided	308	19.5
Total	1,577	100.0

Overall, the results presented in the tables 7 and 8 suggest that the majority of Belarusians prefer security and stability and accept certain restrictions on democracy in order to achieve peace and political stability.

It is important to note that in 2013–2014, Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies conducted another research on the social contract in Belarus to find out whether the population’s expectations concerning the benefits offered by the state have changed due to economic crisis of 2009–2011. The findings of the study showed that the deteriorating economic situation in the country did not diminish the population’s trust in the state. Belarusians’ agreement with the social contract remained unchanged. Additionally, the population enhanced its appreciation of the goods provided by the state, they chose to rely more on themselves and expect less from the state (Pikulik et al., 2014). This findings are largely consistent with those of “Annual survey report: Belarus – 3rd wave” (EU Neighbors East, 2018), which reveals, that the government remains the most trusted institution for Belarusians (58 percent), and this trust has gone up (8 percent) in comparison to last year’s findings.

Additionally, according to Pikulik et al., (2014) the population agreed that some freedoms could be limited in order to preserve civil peace and political stability. Furthermore, the current situation and the functioning of the regime seem to the citizens more beneficial than anything they can achieve over a longer period, as the costs of the change could be too high. The research published by Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies in 2014 provides the

following results: 75 percent of the Belarusians support the idea that Belarus is in need of reforms, whereas only 15 percent of them are ready to suffer the consequences of these reforms. Thus, the results from 2009 shown in the tables 7 and 8 virtually correspond the new results from 2013 (Pikulik et al., 2014). Table 9 provides an example on the population’s almost unchanged opinion on the issue:

**Table 9: In our country, the state ensures civil peace and political stability, and this justifies certain restrictions on democracy and freedom of speech. To what extent do you agree (Pikulik, et al., 2013)?**

	2009/percent	2013/percent
Fully agree	9.1	7.2
Rather agree	34.6	34.5
Rather disagree	27.2	30.2
Fully disagree	10.1	10.0

Taken together, the evidence presented in this subchapter suggests that giving up freedoms for security and stability composes a significant part of the social contract system in Belarus. However, it is important to bear in mind that not all the findings from this section can be extrapolated to a larger group of the Belarusian population. Nevertheless, in a few cases the qualitative interview results agree with the secondary data and can be transferred to a larger group of Belarusians. These are findings concerning Belarusians’ prioritizing order, security and stability over human rights issues.

**5.4 Political participation and the future**

**5.4.1 Political participation**

Seven interviewees out of eleven state that they are not interested in politics and are not ready to be more politically active. A common view among those interviewees is that they do not need to be politically active, as they do not need to change anything, or because they appreciate a peaceful and quiet life. The two last statements suggest that the interviewees relate political activity to disorder. Only one interviewee (W40) says that she could consider being more politically active in order to fight for animal and environmental rights. Interestingly, most interviewees state that it is useless to be politically active, as one cannot change anything in their country, and they fear of negative consequences for them and their families if they do so. The most typical response is:

...I have children, I am afraid to have consequences, I fear for their security. I do not believe that there will be changes. There is no sense. I am pessimistic. People have received an acceptable standard of living and they are satisfied (M30-1).

Another individual comments:

There is no use to try to influence anything in our country. I can compare this process with Don Quixote fighting the windmills. It will not help you and you will never change anything or win a court case against the state if you are an ordinary person (M48).

Further, we discussed the effectiveness of demonstrations on influencing the governmental decisions. The majority of the interviewees note that demonstrations are useless, nothing will change and that is why people do not participate in demonstrations. In addition, the authorities control all the demonstrations and actions of protest. One interviewee comments:

Not more than five people ever come out. What is the point? You will not change anything by a demonstration. It is not so easy to organize a demonstration. You need to get permission from the local authorities. As for me, I support demonstrations, let them protest if they want. But no one will go out and protest (M30-2).

However, ten of thirteen interviewees say that they are ready to participate in demonstrations. Three of them would do this in the case of a severe injustice or abuse toward them or their family. However, they would never participate in demonstrations for supporting freedom of speech, freedom of assembly or other similar rights. One interviewee notes:

If the state harasses my family, or if my family is physically abused by the police, I will go out and protest. I will not participate in a demonstration to support freedom of speech. It could have negative consequences for my family (M33).

Two of the interviewees state that they would only do it in the case when the entire population shows solidarity and rises in protest. One interviewee gives an interesting comment:



On one hand I would participate in demonstration in the case of violation of the freedom of assembly. On the other hand, it is useless, as the demonstrations in our countries are like a circus. Everything is controlled and the police vans for the transport of arrested demonstrators are ready before a demonstration starts (M30-1).

And another one notes:

I will support demonstrations silently from home. I will wave a flag from the balcony, nothing more. I do not need troubles. If you participate in demonstrations, you will be beaten. I do not want to be beaten (M62).

Taken together, these findings suggest that that the social contract system remains strong in the country. As mentioned in the theory chapter, the costs for fighting for ones rights could be too high, as there is insecurity about what one can achieve by protesting against the authorities (Haiduk et al., 2009). These results need to be interpreted with caution, as they might not be transferable to a larger group of the Belarusian population due to absence of the secondary research.

#### **5.4.2 Political changes**

A variety of interesting perspectives are expressed by the interviewees while responding to the questions about the possibility of political changes in the country, which again suggests the significance of the social contract system in Belarus. There is a sense of doubt amongst the interviewees concerning their belief in political changes in Belarus in the nearest future. Only three interviewees assume that there might be political changes within a few years. The divergent but interesting responses are illustrated below: “Nothing will change, it is too late to change anything; we should have done that 10 years ago. But if anything changes, our situation will be even worse; our quality of life will deteriorate” (M48).

No, I do not think so. Our president will last long. Who can substitute him? The interference of the West will not work in this case. We will not have the same situation as in Ukraine. There are no changes in our country because we have a dictatorship. Belarusians will keep tolerating and abiding the system, we are the most patient people you can find in the world. We are beaten, but we tolerate it. If the

president will make his son the next president, maybe the population will protest (M51-1).

I think changes will happen. Our population is patient, but there are limits to our patience. Maybe because of low wages. However, at the same time, I think we do not have a leader who would start the process and lead the population, a person whom the population would trust. How could you trust anyone else? They receive money from abroad. I would not trust and support a person from the opposition (W52).

Any initiative to change the situation was suppressed a long time ago. The people do not protest, the authorities continue oppressing the population. The people are intimidated, they are afraid that protests could turn out to war (M30-1).

Nothing will change because a large part of our population still loves our president. The authorities say that 86 percent support him. I do not believe it, but I am sure that 50 percent would support Lukashenka. Everyone I know and many people I have been talking to are supporting him and would vote for him. We do not have an option. People are not stupid; they understand that our country does not have any resources. How would we survive? He pulls us somehow. He is a smart person (M30-2).

In summary, a few elements of the social contract could be identified within these responses. The interviewees fear disorder and war, they prefer stability and would even support an authoritarian leader as they fear changes, which could make the situation worse (Haiduk et al., 2009).

The numbers from both Freedom House (2016) and UNDP (2017) show similar results: overall, Belarusians are not ready to stand up for their rights. 45.4 percent of the respondents who had experienced human rights violations just kept silent and did nothing. They explained their inaction by their confidence that nothing will help anyway (Freedom House, 2016). According to the UNDP report, 39 percent of respondents say they were not ready to join a protest against a toxic industrial development, which was lower than in Ukraine and Moldova. Only 35 percent of Belarusians state that they would participate in the protest (UNDP, 2017:34).

It is important to bear in mind that the opinion of the interviewees shown in the section above cannot be extrapolated to a larger part of the Belarusian population, as it is not supported by the secondary sources. However, the results concerning the readiness to stand up for their rights could be moderately transferred to a larger group of Belarusians, as the qualitative interview findings are supported by the UNDP (2017) and the Freedom House (2016) research.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

### **6.1 Summarizing the results**

In this thesis, I have examined Belarusians' perspectives on human rights by inquiring into their values, mentality, human rights thinking, and attitudes toward the regime as well as human rights violations in Belarus.

To answer the key research question, I have explored three sub-questions. Through the first sub-question, I aimed to find out whether Belarusians' attitudes toward human rights are in conformity with the universality of human rights. To achieve this, I investigated their values and opinion on human rights and human rights violations in Belarus. Through the second sub-question, I aimed to investigate whether security and stability is more important for Belarusians than civil liberties, and whether they are satisfied with the political and economic situation in their country. Through the third sub-question, I attempted to examine Belarusians' readiness to stand up for their rights. To answer the second and the third sub-questions, I explored the social contract system in Belarus. As I applied a mixed method with the secondary sources of quantitative research in combination with the qualitative interview data, the results below could be extrapolated to a larger group of the Belarusian population and can thus provide the answer to the main research question.

The evidence from this study suggests that the general answer to the first supplementary question points mostly in one direction: Belarusians' values and attitudes toward human rights do not seem to be in conformity with the universality of human rights, and are most likely close to the relative approach within the concept. First, the major findings in this section seem to indicate that the elements of collectivism are still typical for Belarusian society. These elements include communal significance, solidarity, tolerance, patience, and importance of cultural traditions and heritage (Korosteleva, 2016; Babosov, 2013; Jaskevich, 2013;

Qualitative interview data, 2018), which are supported by cultural relativism (Donneley, 2013; Haas, 2014; Spagnoli, 2007). In addition, the terms democracy and human rights are not among the characteristic values of Belarusians, who rather prioritize order, stability, security and protection (UNDP, 2017; EU Neighbors East, 2018; Qualitative interview data, 2018). Secondly, the most obvious finding to emerge from this section suggests, that civic literacy and knowledge on human rights are quite low in Belarus, which makes Belarusians feel positive about the state of democracy and human rights in their country (UNDP, 2017; Freedom House, 2016; Qualitative interview data, 2018). Thirdly, this study suggests that civil and political rights concern the population much less than socio-economic rights, where workers' rights seem to be of a greater significance for Belarusians (UNDP, 2017; Qualitative interview data, 2018). These findings point in the direction of cultural relativism as well, as relativists do not consider liberal values as an important attribute of non-Western cultures (Spagnoli, 2007). However, it is noteworthy that the elements of universalism do exist within Belarusians human rights thinking, as for example, according to the Freedom Report (2016), they mostly agree that all people are equally entitled to human rights.

Another significant finding from this study, which is the answer to the second supplementary question, suggests that the majority of Belarusians seem to trust the state and do not have radical dissatisfaction with the current situation in the country (EU Neighbors East, 2018; Pikulik et.al, 2014; Haiduk, et al., 2009; Qualitative interview data, 2018). Additionally, Belarusians would possibly accept certain restrictions on democracy in order to achieve peace and political stability (Pikulik et.al, 2014; Haiduk, et al., 2009; Qualitative interview data, 2018). These results suggest the strong presence of the social contract system in the country (Pikulik et.al, 2014; Haiduk, et al., 2009, Qualitative interview data, 2018).

Moreover, the results of this research seem to suggest that Belarusians are not ready to stand up for their rights, which is the answer to the third sub-question. They explain their inaction by their confidence that it is useless to protest against the regime, as nothing will change anyway (Freedom House, 2016; UNDP, 2017; Qualitative interview data, 2018).

Furthermore, the political and economic situation in Belarus seems to the citizens more beneficial than anything they can achieve over a longer period, as the costs of the change could be too high (Pikulik et.al, 2014; Qualitative interview data, 2018). Although the majority of Belarusians support the idea of political reforms in their country, they are not ready to suffer the consequences of these reforms. These findings seem to indicate that order,

security and stability are of a greater importance for Belarusians than civil liberties (Pikulik et al., 2014; UNDP, 2017; Qualitative interview data, 2018).

Returning to the main research question posted at the beginning of this study it is now possible to suggest that Belarusians' values, human rights thinking and attitudes to the regime seem to have correlation with repressive human rights practices in Belarus. This correlation could be explained by the prevalence of relativism within Belarusians' human rights thinking, a gap in the knowledge on human rights and choosing order, stability and security rather than civil liberties. Additionally, the majority of Belarusians do not seem to have great dissatisfaction with the current situation in their country and are not ready to stand up for their rights. This explains why the human rights situation in Belarus remains unchanged. It must be noted that the expectations concerning the research results are fulfilled, as the findings suggest the prevalence of collectivist values among Belarusians and their unwillingness to stand up for their rights, which was my suggestion before conducting the research.

## **6.2 Limitations, contributions and recommendations**

It is crucial to note that this research is limited in several ways. First, the scope of the study is limited in terms of the examination of a few particular rights violations in the country, and in scope of time. The validity of the results is limited to the recent past, to be precise 2013-2018 time frame, which corresponds to the period when the largest part of both the primary and the secondary data was collected. Second, as mentioned in the methodology chapter and noted throughout the analysis section, the current study is unable to present the complete generalizable results. A few findings from qualitative interviews cannot be extrapolated to the larger part of the Belarusian population, as the secondary data was insufficient to support the specific parts of the qualitative interview results. Nevertheless, these findings can represent a specific value for the understanding of human rights attitudes in a local context and a better understanding of how the population's attitudes toward human rights contribute to the resilience of authoritarian regimes.

For instance, this study has shown that the interviewees stress the idea of Belarusians' own values, which are different from the Western ones. The assumptions of homosexuality as a Western idea, Western individualism, alienation of the Western mentality and culture support the relativist approach within the human rights concept. Furthermore, the results from

qualitative interviews suggest that the interviewees' values and mentality are for the most part in conformity with the official ideology of the Belarusian state.

Other interesting elements to emerge from qualitative interviews are the ideas supporting a ban on demonstrations and the fix-term contract system as well as attitudes toward forced labor issues, which again point in the direction of cultural relativism. Additionally, general consent to forced labor among marginalized groups of people and considering forced labor as obligation seem to indicate an alternative interpretation of the concept of rights by the interviewees. However, the elements of universalism do exist within interviewees' human rights thinking, as for example a general support for freedom of assembly, an awareness of violation of workers' rights and freedom of expression, as well as the younger generations' individualist attitudes.

Further, what concerns interviewees' attitudes toward the political and economic situation in the country and the regime, the results of the research point in two directions: on one hand, some of the interviewees feel positive about and are proud of their country. On the other hand, a few interviewees express their dissatisfaction with the regime and the economic situation in Belarus. However, those who are less satisfied with the current situation still prefer the status quo and are not ready to stand up for their rights. A possible explanation of this could be the interviewees' fear of repressions, disorder and war: the interviewees prefer order and stability and have fear of change that could make the situation worse. In addition, the research shows that the interviewees seem to support the idea of a strong authoritarian leader being indispensable to achieve security, stability and order, strongly suggesting the presence of the social contract system in Belarus.

An interesting and quite surprising finding is, however, the divergent opinions among the younger (20-30 age group) and the older generations (40-60 age group): the younger generations, in contrast to the older ones, are almost certainly less satisfied with the regime and have slightly different values, which seems to move toward individualism and the universality of human rights.

It is important to note that, even if the results above cannot be extrapolated to a larger group of the Belarusian population, they could be the subject of qualitative generalization or transferability. In other words, these results could be transferred to other contexts and

situations (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). I have chosen a case study of Belarus and perspectives on human rights in a local context, and I have applied the theories of relativism versus universalism, ideology and the social contract theory on the analysis. There arises a question of transferability of my case study to similar issues in other countries, as the knowledge produced in a specific interview situation can be transferred to other relevant situations (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Despite the fact that one cannot find a case identical to Belarus, this case study could be transformed to similar authoritarian regimes. I have presented a detailed account of the research process, so that another researcher will be able to understand how to conduct a similar case study.

In summary, the present research makes several noteworthy contributions to the theme of perspectives on human rights in a local context by examining the case of Belarus and providing findings concerning Belarusians' values, attitudes to human rights, the regime and human rights violations in their country. These findings suggest that human rights related relativism is still entrenched in Belarusian society. Additionally, by exploring the Belarusian population's attitudes to human rights and the current situation in the country, this research contributes to understanding the reasons for the regime's resilience. Furthermore, this research can serve as a base for the future studies of the Belarusian regime, the state of democracy and human rights in the country. Further work needs to be done in the future to establish whether changes in the populations' attitudes toward the regime are going to take place. It would be interesting to assess Belarusians' values and human rights thinking in the future, especially when the younger generations replace the older Soviet ones, if the regime remains in power. If not, there will emerge another possible area of future research.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview guide

1. Overall, can you tell me about the level of satisfaction with your life? What are you satisfied and not satisfied with?
2. How would you estimate your family's financial standing?
3. What most of all makes you proud of your country and what makes you feel shame and regret?
4. Have you experienced the violation of your rights?
5. How often do you think about the human rights situation in your country?
6. What are the most important values typical for a Belarusian people/country?
7. What are the most characteristic traits of Belarussian society?
8. What are the specific features of Belarussian mentality?
9. What do you think is the biggest difference between Belarusian and Western values?
10. What is more important: individual interests or the interests of society? (*Why?*)
11. What is more important: the well-being of society as a whole, or well-being of a separate individual? (*Why? Can you give an example?*)
12. What is your attitude to unpaid community labor?
13. What can you say about the ideology of Belarussian state?
14. What do you think about giving up freedoms and human rights in order to achieve order and economic stability in the country?
15. What can you say about the presence of a strong and authoritative leader, "A strong hand"?
16. What can you say about possibility of influence anything happening in the country for people like you?
17. What do you think about that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights? That Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status?
18. How would you assess the political situation in the country?
19. What can you say about democracy in Belarus?
20. How would you assess the human rights situation in Belarus?
21. The protection of which rights is most important to you?
22. What rights do you think are most often violated in Belarus?

23. What rights do you think are almost never violated?
24. What do you think is the state of freedom of expression in the country?
25. What is your opinion about the government's control over the media?
26. What is your opinion about the articles 367 (defamation of the President), 368 (insult of the president) and 369 (insult of public officials) of criminal code?
27. What is your opinion about the harassment of journalists?
28. Which view of street rallies and demonstrations would you have?
29. How effective can be demonstrations in influencing the political decisions?
30. What is your opinion on the situation on of workers' rights in the country?
31. What is your opinion about short-term contracts?
32. What can you say about labor unions in the country?
33. What is your opinion about mandatory community labor?
34. What do you think about the money earned at "subbotniks" are withheld from your salaries and used for the needs of society?
35. What is your opinion about forced labor in your country?
36. What do you think about that people leading an asocial way of life must be engaged in labor?
37. What is your opinion about medical labor centers?
38. Overall, to which extent are you interested in politics? Why?
39. In which case are you ready to participate in a demonstration?
40. What can you say about the possibility of political changes in Belarus in the nearest future?
41. What is your attitude to Putin? How would you describe your feelings toward Putin?
42. Why are there no political changes in your country?