

Between Survival and Standby: A Review of Civil Society in the Regions of Belarus

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Tatsiana Chulitskaya
Natallia Rabava

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the situation and analyze the state of local-level civil society organizations (CSOs) in Belarus during the first half of 2023, with a retrospective examination of the situation following the onset of the political crisis.

As part of the research, we conducted 17 semi-structured qualitative interviews with representatives of local organizations, initiatives, and experts from July to August 2023. The research sample was selected based on accessible contacts and “snowball” method. Among the 17 interviewees, 13 were located outside Belarus, and 4 were within Belarus. All interviewees and their organizations continue to operate inside Belarus. However, in some cases, the activities of activists have a more individual (expert, coaching) character. Some CSOs, after liquidation, continue their activities by utilizing the status of individual entrepreneurs. A portion of the leaders, managers, and activists from organizations have relocated abroad.

The organizations and initiatives mentioned in this study have different legal statuses:

1. Organizations that are still registered in Belarus;
2. Organizations in the process of liquidation;
3. Liquidated organizations.

A number of organizations belonging to the last two categories continue to operate in Belarus as networks, horizontal structures, or initiatives.

In terms of quantitative composition, the organizations/initiatives surveyed have a membership ranging from 4 to 30 people, and their stated reach among target audiences varies from several dozens to several thousand individuals. Thematically, the survey encompasses a wide range of organizations working in areas such as urban development, local advocacy, gender issues, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, non-formal education, media activism, creative development, social issues, etc.

Repression and hostile environment for civil society and local activists

Repression is a determining factor in the activities of Belarusian CSOs. Although we did not find a strong regional specificity in repressions, it can be observed that the most severe repressions against civil society have occurred and continue to occur in regions with a more developed and diverse third sector. This is particularly evident in areas with a higher level of protest mobilization in 2020, as well as in cases where local law enforcers and/or officials have taken the initiative.

The following were cited as features of repression against civil society at the local level:

- Activists may not be imprisoned, but a situation of constant pressure is created (calls for interrogations, interviews; inspections by various bodies);
- Some organizations are still not liquidated and formally have the opportunity to act. This creates a situation of a window of opportunity, but also leads to an increase in the level of distrust of organizations towards each other;

- Minsk as the capital and the largest city is assessed as a somewhat less dangerous place for civic activities (due to its size and remaining relative diversity).

After the authorities essentially ‘cleaned up’ organizations in the regions, the pressure and repression shifted from the organizational to the individual level. Additionally, the consequences of this repression include people from the third sector being dismissed from other places of work, essentially resulting in a professional ban.

Opportunities for local action and achievements of local organizations

A number of local organizations and initiatives continue to conduct various activities within Belarus. It was noted that there are either no established rules or constantly changing ‘rules of the game’ for local activities. Offline activities persist, but they are conducted with a priority on security, and events are canceled in response to alarm signals. The spread of self-censorship has also been mentioned. Within Belarus, organizations refrain from organizing large-scale events and instead limit their activities to a select, verifiable group of individuals.

The following areas and activities were mentioned that organizations still carry out at the local level:

1. Initiating and implementing local initiatives to enhance urban areas, address communal and environmental issues, and improve the overall urban environment.
2. Monitoring the situation in cities, identifying issues in the communal sector, urban planning, and territorial development, and informing local authorities for corrective action. Additionally, helping citizens in drafting similar appeals.
3. Monitoring the activities of government bodies, including the courts, and providing assistance to political prisoners through activities such as letter-writing, sending care packages to detention facilities, and various other human rights initiatives.
4. Organizing creative spaces, clubs, and activities for socialization and communication, such as film screenings, board games, and mini-festivals. Conducting group discussions focused on creative activities.
5. Recruiting new members who align with shared values after educational events and programs.
6. Supporting socially vulnerable groups and individuals by offering humanitarian assistance and conducting consultations for diverse target groups.
7. Conducting educational outreach, popular science events, educational programs, courses, and activities on politically neutral topics, as well as engaging in research work.
8. Support activities for colleagues within own organizations and the broader third sector, offering advice on security, international travel, adaptation to new environments, and finding opportunities for psychological support.
9. Media activities. Creation of blogs and other media projects both from abroad at the level of city centers of the regions and micro-blogs inside Belarus.

Some ethnic and religious organizations and communities also continue to operate.

There has been discussion regarding the demand for public activities among people inside Belarus. According to the interviewees, individuals are prepared and willing to come together, socialize, and engage in activities perceived as potentially non-dangerous.

The achievements of local organizations and initiatives were cited as follows:

- The very fact of preserving and sustaining civil society structures on the ground.
- Meeting the needs of target groups and providing unique services for which there are no alternatives from the state.
- Conducting group activities and events within the country, creating spaces for communication.
- The successful completion of projects aimed at improving local areas or solving other community problems.
- Attracting new members to organizations after their participation in events, expanding social networks, and increasing the number of followers.
- Limited preservation of grassroots activism in the case of horizontal initiatives that emerged in 2020 and the continuation of their activities in a limited capacity.

Assessment of civil society, organizations, and various aspects of their work. Performance problems.

The assessment of the state of civil society varied significantly among the respondents, both in terms of content and emotional tone. Some interviewees provided extremely pessimistic assessments, while others expressed conditional optimism. In the context of more negative assessments, it was mentioned that some organizations did not survive the crisis and effectively ceased to exist. In these cases, interviewees shifted their focus towards their own physical self-preservation, continuing to engage in socially beneficial activities at an individual level, either as experts or within relocated CSOs.

Among the responses falling in the middle of the emotional spectrum were those indicating that civil society and activists are still in a state of survival. They continue their activities; however, respondents frequently mentioned experiencing a challenging psychological state, including burnout, anxiety, and fatigue resulting from the repressive background. A recurring theme is security, as well as (self-)limitations and self-censorship of their activities, coupled with the expectation of future repressions.

In discussions about survival, there was also a recurring theme regarding the challenges faced by employees who have relocated abroad. This situation contributes to a sense of material and social insecurity among these individuals.

An important characteristic of the state of civil society is the assertion that it is 'invisible'. Some organizations, particularly those led by individuals located abroad, claimed to have successfully navigated the crisis and were able to carry out certain activities. However, these activities were characterized by their relatively small scale and a significant degree of 'invisibility'. This means that even organizations that believe they have survived the crisis refrain from publicly disclosing their activities for security reasons.

The most optimistic assessments were that, against the background of constant repression, the teams of organizations had united and become stronger. Internal processes and policies that previously lacked time and human resources have been established. It was said that civil society was adapting and could be said to be reformatting.

Lack of alternative to repressed CSOs on the ground

Repressions have generally “cleaned up” the space - most of the organizations that existed before 2020 have been liquidated, and many activists have been imprisoned or left. As a result, according to some estimates in interviews, a kind of vacuum has been left in place of the previously existing third sector, i.e. the old organizations were destroyed, but no one has taken their place. At the same time, the state cannot and does not want to fill this vacuum. In cases when government officials or GONGOs try to borrow and repeat some projects and ideas that CSOs used to implement, they, according to interviewees, lack adequate understanding of the purpose of such activities. Also, GONGOs can be used for propaganda purposes for ideological attacks on organizations and people disloyal to the authorities.

However, other assessments were also voiced, particularly in the realm of social organizations, where not all entities were shuttered. Some organizations opted for a position of submission to the authorities, resulting in a form of co-optation where social organizations were absorbed by the state.

Government officials sometimes attempt to compel organizations to provide certain (social) services without providing funding, assuming that the organizations themselves will invest funds.

In several cases, it was noted that new grassroots initiatives, often initiated by young people, are emerging in Belarusian cities. Typically, these initiatives are related to culture and leisure activities. It’s likely that the individuals launching these new initiatives have either not directly experienced repressions or assess their danger differently compared to long-time activists who have worked in the third sector.

Agenda of organizations

Almost all organizations carry out some kind of activity to address local issues. According to one opinion, people in the regions are more concerned with issues close to them, rather than those that are highly political or even geopolitical. The agenda of local organizations working in the regions has become as neutral as possible and predominantly addresses topics that can be considered to be free of potential security risks.

Assessment of access to target groups

With few exceptions, interviewees discussed difficulties in accessing target groups, which can be attributed to:

- The overall repressive background;

- Limited opportunities for offline activities;
- A decrease in the number of activists in the regions;
- Challenges in organizing offline events due to security concerns;
- The state of independent media, some of which have been labeled as ‘extremist organizations’, block of their websites in Belarus.

Organizations that conduct events in an online format naturally encounter fewer problems with accessing their target audiences. However, even in this scenario, they often have to rely exclusively on their own channels for information dissemination. Organizations that have been operating in a particular field for an extended period and have a wide network of program alumni also tend to have better access to their target audiences.

Two systemic problems related to accessing target audiences in the regions of Belarus, which existed before 2020, were raised: 1) Greater challenges in reaching people in the regions for CSOs compared to Minsk; 2) Existing channels for disseminating information about civil society events historically placed more emphasis on the capital than on the regions.

Planning horizon

Most CSOs working at the local level are engaged in planning their activities and understand their value and importance for the success of their activities. Some have both strategic and operational plans, as well as project indicators to guide them. However, when an organization, including its management, is located in Belarus, and when most of its activities are conducted offline, planning horizons tend to diminish or disappear altogether. Organizations operate on the basis of today’s conditions with conditional planning for a few months.

Funding situation

The funding situation of regional organizations and their activists, both inside and outside Belarus, is unstable and complicated. All organizations that receive funding operate on a project-based basis. The most challenging financial situation is experienced by organizations fully located within the country (without staff members who have left). In these cases, there is often a lack of funding, and activities tend to continue primarily on a volunteer basis. In organizations where some members have left the country, it often helps to secure funding for those who remain in Belarus. Additionally, activists who have relocated abroad and are also working elsewhere, whether in other CSOs or the commercial sector, tend to have somewhat better financial security.

Problems of organizations and initiatives working at the local level in Belarus

The problems mentioned in the interviews can be divided into several groups:

1. Problems related to the repressive environment, which include numerous security risks and a deteriorating legal landscape. Simultaneously, the state is introducing complex regulations in some areas that hinder the operations of CSOs. High security risks result in a self-censorship effect, leading organizations to decide not to include participants

from Belarus in their programs or engage them as employees in their projects. There are also threats or cases of inclusion in the list of extremist formations or the recognition of information platforms as extremist materials. In these situations, organizations inevitably face both a quantitative decrease in their reach and audience, and an increase in the risk of arrest for people participating in their events.

2. The problem of “invisibility” of organizations’ activities has several dimensions:
 - Due to security risks, organizations themselves rarely publicly disclose and do not seek to disclose their activities, projects, successes, and achievements.
 - Due to ignorance about each other’s projects and plans, organizations try to get funding for similar projects.
 - There are very few even closed, non-public venues where organizations can share information about their activities and plans with both donors and each other. The situation when Belarusian organizations are invited to the few existing platforms on unclear criteria and grounds was also criticized.
3. Insufficient or completely absent donor support for organizations’ activities in Belarus. Some regional activists said that they receive almost no support after 2020.
4. Specifics of donor support: it is difficult to get funding for mental health care, emergency assistance, strategic meetings.
5. Serious risks to material situation and risk of poverty for activists in case of lack of funding. In the case of relocation, people from the regions were often in a difficult financial situation even before they were forced to leave, so for them moving to a more expensive host country means even greater material risks.
6. Complex and unrealizable requirements for project reporting within Belarus.

Relationships with foreign donor agencies. Satisfaction with existing programs.

Many local organizations do not have direct interactions with donor organizations, primarily due to safety concerns for organizations with leadership inside the country. In some cases, it was noted that there is a lack of awareness about how and whom to approach for support, and that donors lack suitable formats and communication methods for such organizations. Organizations that are either divisions of larger entities or part of umbrella structures mentioned that communication with donors is typically handled by the heads of the parent organization or umbrella structure. Additionally, in some instances, contacts with donors have become outdated, and new connections have not been established.

Overall, donor relations were generally rated positively. There was relative satisfaction with existing programs and the availability of a variety of opportunities to apply. It was commendable that some donors had recently relaxed reporting requirements somewhat and had become more flexible. However, many challenges in this regard were still cited.

One of the most significant difficulties, not only in relation to donor structures but also in policy related to Belarusian civil society as a whole, was identified as the absence of a clear strategy

of action in relation to Belarus (or the lack of awareness about it among activists) on the part of Western donor organizations. This leads to the problem of donor organizations having insufficient understanding of how to support organizations and initiatives that remain inside Belarus and continue to work at the local level.

Needs of organizations: support and assistance required

Support requests can be categorized as follows:

1. Financial support for activities inside Belarus. The need for any, at least minimal, local support to continue providing services and conducting activities at the request of people who work inside the country. The request for support of legal, psychological offline services inside Belarus was voiced. At the same time, it was claimed that the interviewees have technical solutions for transferring funds received abroad to Belarus.
2. Legal support of organizations' activities. Consultations inside and outside Belarus on registration, functioning of both CSOs and commercial structures.
3. Psychological support to both teams of organizations and their target groups.
4. Support for strategic planning as well as requests for physical meetings of teams of organizations with employees working from different countries. Visa support for those in Belarus to participate in these meetings.
5. Simplification of the reporting system for projects, especially those implemented within Belarus. Requests were voiced not to require physical signatures with transcripts of names in such a case. Ensuring that the required reporting is proportional to the support provided, so that activists do not have to provide complex reporting for small amounts.
6. Providing quick, emergency support for urgent requests from organizations.
7. Scholarships or special support programs for activists forced to leave Belarus on an emergency basis. This is especially relevant for people from the regions, who often do not have a financial "safety cushion".
8. Assistance in purchasing new office equipment and telephones. Such programs were in place in previous years, but did not cover existing needs.
9. Need to improve communication both within the sector and with the donor community. Additional platforms for intra- and intersectoral communication are needed for reality check, taking into account the views of different stakeholders.
10. Support of networking events for Belarusian organizations as useful for local level organizations.
11. Organizing educational events for activists from Belarus with trips to other countries. Learning good practices, training and consultations on legal issues, security topics, etc., as well as familiarization with existing programs and opportunities for donor support.
12. Support CSO media projects as focusing directly on audiences within Belarus.

13. Assist in finding and recruiting new people to the organization.
14. Supporting and conducting educational activities for those who have left and those who have stayed in the country, both to facilitate communication and improve mutual understanding between people.

In several cases, emotionally charged statements were made expressing the absolute lack of clarity regarding how one could assist Belarusian organizations and activists who continue their work inside the country.

“What kind of support do you need? - That’s a tough question, that’s what I want to say - praying, you know, for things to change, I think, other mechanisms, [I] don’t know.”

CONCLUSIONS

1. Various kinds of public activities are possible and occur in the regions of Belarus, but they are mostly of a non-political, neutral nature. CSOs, which for the most part have lost their legal status, often continue their activities, but to a limited extent.
2. Organizations that operate inside Belarus face approximately the same problems. In the course of the research, we did not identify any serious regional differences, except for different intensity of repressions against organizations and activists.
3. State repression of civil society has led to a significant change in its very structure. In general, everyone suffered from repressions. At the same time, regions and cities with the most developed civil society, a higher level of protest mobilization in 2020, as well as those where local officials, due to their own motivation for repressive actions, suffered the most. As a result of the changes in civil society, the volume of services and activities provided by civil society has significantly decreased. However, the state neither by itself nor with the help of GONGOs has not yet been able to offer any real alternatives, although in some cases it tries to imitate public activity.
4. In Belarus’ regions, people continue to demand CSO activism and services, and more broadly, grassroots activism and horizontal linkages.
5. Among the important dilemmas and challenges of civil society is the compulsion to operate with the lowest degree of visibility. “Invisibility” leads to the impression that “everything is dead” and “nothing is left”. However, organizations cannot afford more visibility, except for those operating in the format of (social) media from abroad.
6. There is a demand for support for organizations, initiatives and activities inside Belarus, which, based on the analysis of the interviews, is not currently being met.