

The Dynamics of Changes in the State and Needs of CSOs in Belarus from 2020 to 2024

Monitoring 6

2024

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2020 to 2024 has been extremely challenging and arguably the most dramatic in the relatively short history of civil society in Belarus. Civil society organizations (CSOs) faced various forms of repression, and the vast majority were ultimately shut down within the country. Many relocated abroad, where they managed to stabilize and continue their activities in some form, while a few organizations found ways to carry on their work inside Belarus. This general description applies to the third sector as a whole; however, the period has not been uniform. CSOs experienced different phases, progressing at different speeds and not always following the same path.

In the sixth monitoring report, while examining the state and needs of CSOs during this period, we tracked the dynamics of changes in the main external and internal challenges organizations faced, as well as the evolving responses to these challenges, based on existing research.

DYNAMICS OF CHANGES IN THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT: LEGAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS

The change in the external context for the Belarusian third sector is described in a number of studies and analytical materials. In the BIPART study¹ which outlines the state and needs of civil society (broadly understood to include business organizations, diaspora groups, media, and neighborhood communities), the situation in 2020 is characterized as political mobilization. However, civil society organizations themselves were not the direct drivers of this surge, which was later followed by a harsh backlash. This reflects the overall dynamics of socio-political life, marked by significant events that greatly influenced it. Initially, there was the COVID-19 epidemic, which spurred public movements, followed by the presidential elections, which were also accompanied by numerous societal processes and events. Interestingly, in a survey² conducted in April-May 2021, shortly before the organized crackdown on CSOs in July 2021, respondents from these organizations, when asked about their expectations for the following year, indicated two possibilities: either the organizations would be completely shut down and cease their activities, or the crisis would somehow have a positive resolution³, allowing them to expand their thematic focus and outreach to target groups. The prolonged nature of the crisis and the mass relocation were not foreseen by the respondents, or perhaps they were unwilling to consider such unfavorable outcomes as viable options, even within the framework of scenario planning. They tended to limit their projections to a general notion of “everything will be shut down; all activities will cease” without delving into details or considering the various sub-scenarios of negative developments.

However, the political crisis began to unfold, leading to ongoing persecution and repression of CSOs and activists, which has continued since the summer of 2021 for three years now. The dynamics of repression against CSOs have been documented, particularly in the monthly monitoring reports by Lawtrend, which focus on the state of freedom of association and the condition of CSOs. According to these reports, from the start of the 2020 crisis until the end of

¹ Civil Society in Belarus in the Context of a Political Crisis: Current State and Challenges, BIPART, 2021 https://bipart.eu/picture/library/needs_assessment_full_survey_full_version_eng.pdf

² Ibid.

³ Similar expectations were held by Belarusian experts and activists later, prior to the 2022 referendum. Currently, this mirrors the sentiments and expectations of Georgian CSOs and activists in anticipation of the parliamentary elections in October 2024.

July 2024, at least 1,742 organizations⁴ were shut down or self-dissolved. Many of the members or employees of such organizations were forced to emigrate, and upon resuming their activities, they had to register their organizations in other countries, reassess their missions, and revise their working methods. For many organizations, along with security challenges, this has led to reduced public visibility. All of this has significantly complicated their interaction with target groups within the country and increased the level of psychological burnout among staff and members. For organizations that remain in Belarus, challenges include inspections by various authorities, often accompanied by intimidation, state co-optation of the remaining CSOs, and the inability to receive funding (despite changes to the “Law on Local Governance and Self-Government”, which theoretically allows CSOs to receive funding from local budgets). Additionally, certain activities that were previously open to CSOs, such as providing social services with accommodation, now require licensing. A law on the “Foundations of Civil Society” was also adopted, which essentially provides a legal framework for recognizing as part of civil society only those organizations deemed so by the authorities. It further defines an even narrower circle of CSOs eligible to interact with the state in special formats⁵. This reflects attempts by the authorities to cultivate a “correct” civil society, partly co-opting some of the remaining independent CSOs that were not previously shut down. According to a BIPART study⁶, by the first half of 2022, it was noted that for organizations still operating in Belarus, regulatory bodies began to focus more on the operational aspects of their work. This suggests that the authorities were studying these organizations with the intention of replacing or co-opting them, a process that had already started in 2021.

Administrative and criminal prosecution of the leadership and members of civil society organizations, as well as activists, continues relentlessly and extends to those who have left the country through the use of absentia court proceedings. Activists are added to extremist and terrorist lists; access to websites and other information channels of CSOs is restricted, and these organizations are also declared by the authorities as “extremist materials” and/or “extremist formations”. The same applies to independent media, which previously served as a communication channel for CSOs with various target groups.

For relocated CSOs, the external context and working conditions are determined by the country of registration. These conditions, while significantly more favorable compared to Belarus, still vary even within the European Union. After March 2024, the work of Belarusian CSOs registered in Georgia became problematic due to the adoption of the “foreign agents law,” which requires nearly all CSOs to register in a special registry and submit detailed information about their activities and finances.

⁴ Monitoring the Situation of Freedom of Association and the Status of Civil Society Organizations in the Republic of Belarus, July 2024. Lawtrend, 2024. <https://www.lawtrend.org/english/monitoring-of-the-situation-with-freedom-of-association-and-the-status-of-civil-society-organizations-in-the-republic-of-belarus-july-2024>

⁵ Structure and Prospects of Civil Society in Belarus: Status as of 2024, Factors of Change, Options for Development Strategies. 2024

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DI8cgBLpInsc33dBRH0rMxL654VhOhwL/view>

⁶ State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis (Monitoring: January - July 2022). BIPART, 2022

https://bipart.eu/picture/library/cso_needs_2nd_update_eng.pdf

For CSOs remaining in Belarus, BIPART monitoring⁷ identifies several modes of operation as of 2023: underground work (operating outside the legal framework or under the guise of something else), adaptation (essentially participating in state co-optation), and hibernation - a dormant state with no active actions.

The CSO stability index decreased from 5.5 in 2020 to 6.0 in 2023⁸ (the worst situation according to the methodology is indicated by a score of 7.0). At the same time, the sub-index for “Legal Environment” has already reached 7.0 and cannot formally decrease further, even if conditions worsen in the future. Below the 6.0 mark are indicators such as “Financial Stability” (6.7) and “Advocacy” (6.2). The dynamics of other indicators show that the sharp decline in 2020-2021 was followed by a relative plateau in 2022-2023, meaning that this “new normal” has stabilized at this level, according to the Index data.

In the study “Structure and Prospects of Civil Society in Belarus: Status as of 2024, Factors of Change, and Development Strategy Options”, it is described as follows: “The series of crises and upheavals from 2020 to 2022 (the pandemic, the 2020 presidential elections, subsequent protests and a wave of repression, especially focused from 2021 onwards against organized civil society structures, Belarus’s isolation from the outside world, significantly increased after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine) has generally led to the establishment of a new dynamic equilibrium in the state of civil society by early 2024”⁹.

The reaction of Belarusian CSOs to the war in Ukraine is another example of adaptation and even routine adjustment to a crisis or extremely adverse situation. The external conditions for Belarusians, both within the country and abroad, have worsened due to their citizenship in a country that is an aggressor. At the beginning of the war, CSOs paid serious attention to the conflict, creating various initiatives and supporting Ukrainians. However, over time, most CSOs redirected their efforts back to their original agendas and methods of operation. Even a neighboring country's war, which is largely an existential challenge, can be normalized and adjusted to over time.

DYNAMICS OF CHANGES IN THE MAIN ISSUES FACED BY CSOs DURING THIS PERIOD

When describing the dynamics of changes in third sector problems in 2020, it is essential to recognize that this year presented an atypical situation compared to the previous 20 years. It was a time of rapid growth in unregistered citizen participation initiatives - partly in response to COVID-19, partly due to the liberalization and expansion of citizen involvement in the previous years, and partly as a reaction to the onset of the political campaign. Thus, during the crisis, civil society entered with a surge of grassroots mobilization that added to the activities and work of organized civil society, as well as unusually active support from the Belarusian diaspora. There was a wave of interest in the work of CSOs, human rights protection,

⁷ Between Survival and Standby: A Review of Civil Society in the Regions of Belarus. Monitoring (January - June 2023). BIPART, 2023 https://bipart.eu/picture/library/local_csos_in_belarus_eng_full.pdf

⁸ CSO Sustainability Index (Belarus, 2023). CSO Fusion, 2024. <https://storage.googleapis.com/cso-si-dashboard.appspot.com/Reports/CSOSI-Belarus-2023.pdf>

⁹ Structure and Prospects of Civil Society in Belarus: Status as of 2024, Factors of Change, Options for Development Strategies. 2024

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DI8cgBLpInsc33dBRH0rMxL654VhOhwL/view>

environmental issues, local activities, and so on. This wave partially gave rise to new organizations, which often formed abroad.

Accordingly, when describing the dynamics of these years, it is important to consider the issue of the “high start” in 2020. Compared to this initial surge, subsequent engagement of Belarusians in civil society and political activities has been lower. It remains an open question whether this decline is due to disillusionment or a return to the “normal” level of civic participation that existed before the mobilization.

The dynamics of changing needs among CSOs that remain in Belarus are less pronounced and less studied. The fundamental, defining, and unresolved need remains security. There are also expressed needs for funding, inter-sectoral cooperation, finding new methods of working with target groups, maintaining teams and expertise, and psychological support.

The needs of relocated CSOs have shifted from survival (including the process of relocation and legalization in other countries) to maintaining their activities and development. The issue of access to target groups remains acute, and various strategies regarding the level of public visibility are present. By the end of the considered period, competition among organizations for limited resources became more noticeable due to reduced financial support.

A constant issue that needs to be addressed is burnout among employees and activists of CSOs. Interestingly, as early as the beginning of the political crisis, from fall 2020 to spring 2021, 76% of respondents in the BIPART study reported burnout. Since then, representatives of CSOs have regularly spoken about burnout, psychological, and increasingly mental and medical problems. It is likely that this issue has evolved not only in breadth but also in depth, shifting from mere fatigue and burnout to more negative and dangerous forms. On the other hand, the inevitable routine and adaptation to any problem may result in many such issues being displaced (in a psychological sense), not articulated clearly, and possibly not recognized by some people.

It is important to note that respondents in interviews for various monitoring reports consistently mention a lack of understanding among donors regarding the importance of psychological support. They cite instances of funding refusals for such activities and confusion about how to measure their effectiveness. While the donor perspective seems to be slowly changing, the demand for such support and the depth of the problems are growing faster.

As of today, the third sector is more likely losing people than gaining them due to various reasons: detentions and arrests in Belarus, lack of resources, inability to guarantee safety and stable working conditions, and a shortage of skilled personnel in the labor market for the third sector.

In the study “Civil Society Organizations in Belarus at the Beginning of 2023”¹⁰, conducted by the Center for New Ideas and the Centre for European Transformation, a number of problems that most organizations face and cannot address independently are listed. These priority issues (whose resolution constitutes their needs) include:

¹⁰ Civil Society Organizations in Belarus at the Beginning of 2023. CNI, CET, 2023.
<https://newideas.center/organizacii-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-belarusi-na-nachalo-2023-goda/> (in Russian)

- Medical and/or psychological issues among team members
- Repressions against team members, their relatives, or the threat of such repressions
- Shortage of certain specialists
- Narrowing opportunities for interaction with target groups
- Increased risks/fear for target groups interacting with CSOs
- Difficulties in raising funds to maintain the organization itself (salaries and administrative expenses outside of project activities)
- Difficulties in advocating for the interests of target groups within Belarus
- Inability to publicly discuss CSO activities due to safety concerns

The study also addresses other issues, but these either do not affect the majority of surveyed CSOs or the organizations are still able to address them independently. As a result, these issues were categorized by the researchers as less priority.

The conclusions and recommendations in BIPART monitoring reports that investigated the needs of CSOs from 2020 to the summer of 2021 focus on:

- Supporting civil society amid escalating repressions.
- Addressing security issues, given that most activists were still in Belarus.
- Developing flexible, adaptive methods of support for CSOs.

From the summer of 2021, when the mass relocation of organizations began, to the present (mid-2024), research conclusions focus on:

- Supporting CSOs during the relocation process, changes in legal entities, registration countries, the “routinization of crisis”, and issues with communicating with target audiences.
- The need for institutional and flexible support, and the demand for organizational development among organizations that have already experienced acute crises.
- Addressing the need for civil society to bridge gaps and maintain a sense of unity.
- The growing personnel crisis and the need for psychological support, anti-burnout measures, and similar (often individual) assistance.

DYNAMICS OF INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZATIONS: CHANGES IN MISSION, PLANNING, AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Overall, CSOs have sought to preserve their mission and vision, as well as their primary target groups, while adapting their tools and methods of operation. The most noticeable change has been in the area of human rights work. In a BIPART survey¹¹ conducted in April-May 2021, only 8% of CSOs identified human rights work as part of their activities. However, between 2021 and 2023, there was a trend where many civil society organizations began to emphasize human rights as a primary focus, even if they had not done so previously.

However, in 2024, there is a trend toward a decrease in interest in human rights activities among CSOs. Many of them are shifting their focus back to their original missions or switching

¹¹ Civil Society in Belarus in the Context of a Political Crisis: Current State and Challenges, BIPART, 2021 https://bipart.eu/picture/library/needs_assessment_full_survey_full_version_eng.pdf

to educational and outreach activities. Nevertheless, human rights work still remains in the top three types of activities, according to the OEEC and Lawtrend research¹². Support for the third sector and the development of CSOs has become more popular. Predictably, advocacy has dropped almost to zero, from 30% in the BIPART survey¹³ conducted in April-May.

The planning horizons of organizations, which narrowed to weeks and even days during the acute phase of the crisis, have returned to a medium-term focus for relocated organizations. CSOs are now demanding organizational development, strategy revision, and plan writing. The situation is worse for organizations that remain in Belarus, especially those operating underground. Higher security risks and difficulties in obtaining funding do not contribute to an extended planning horizon.

DYNAMICS OF EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES OF ORGANIZATIONS: WORK WITH TARGET GROUPS, INTRA-SECTORAL AND INTER-SECTORAL INTERACTION

Relocated organizations face difficulties accessing their target groups, a challenge that has been repeatedly noted in BIPART monitoring reports. This is especially true for vulnerable groups and the provision of offline services (e.g., hospice work). Organizations are continuously seeking new forms of interaction with their audiences and experimenting, but it appears that no universal and highly effective new methods have been found. Some forms of work have been successfully transitioned to online formats (e.g., training), but experts observe lower effectiveness and engagement compared to similar offline formats.

At the same time, CSOs that have maintained their registration in Belarus often focus significantly on maintaining contact with previously established target groups through previously established communication channels. The primary of these channels are personal meetings and other trust-based mechanisms. Importantly, it is these in-country Belarusian CSOs that have retained the format of membership-based public associations, as defined legislatively.¹⁴

Both relocated organizations and those remaining in Belarus face a dilemma between publicity and safety (for event participants, staff, or CSO members). This often results in near-total “invisibility” of their work, complicating their understanding of their own effectiveness, interaction with target groups, and overall motivation to continue. This issue is particularly acute for organizations that remain in Belarus.

As of 2024, the situation with non-political (cultural, entertainment, educational) events in Belarus seems to have improved. Activism is present to some extent, often in close cooperation with or co-opted by state structures. Thus, “hibernation” is not characteristic of all

¹² Activities of CSOs in the Context of Relocation. OEEC, Lawtrend, 2023.

<https://oeec.org/opinions/research/organizations-in-relocation-research/> (in Russian)

¹³ Civil Society in Belarus in the Context of a Political Crisis: Current State and Challenges, BIPART, 2021
https://bipart.eu/picture/library/needs_assessment_full_survey_full_version_eng.pdf

¹⁴ Structure and Prospects of Civil Society in Belarus: Status as of 2024, Factors of Change, Options for Development Strategies. 2024

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DI8cgBLpInsc33dBRH0rMxL654VhOhwL/view>

organizations and activists remaining in Belarus. “Survival”, even if in a less confrontational form, is gradually prevailing.

As far as intra-sectoral interaction is concerned, within Belarus, connections within the sector are weakening as surviving CSOs become more insular and focused on fulfilling their mission. Within the framework of “securitization” of activists’ consciousness, external contacts with other CSOs are viewed through the lens of risk transfer and may be considered an unacceptable luxury¹⁵. For relocated CSOs, these risks are less significant, and overall, their intra-sectoral interaction is more active, based on shared values, common needs, projects, or within a specific cluster (e.g., human rights or environmental protection). Despite different approaches to how organizations should merge into various types of coalitions¹⁶, CSOs generally have a positive attitude towards intra-sectoral collaboration.

Inter-sectoral collaboration (CSO-business, CSO-state, CSO-media) has also decreased during the examined period. Relations with the Belarusian government for all CSOs, except those that are co-opted, have virtually diminished to zero. By the end of the period, relationships with businesses remain limited to a few organizations, in contrast to the beginning. Relations with the media are complicated by the previously described issue of balancing publicity and safety, as well as frequent mutual “toxicity” between the media and CSOs (increasing risks for involved individuals due to their status as “extremist formations”). The audience (especially within Belarus) is narrowing and losing interest in socio-political and civil issues, which further diminishes incentives for media and CSOs to collaborate.

DIVIDING LINES AND WAYS TO OVERCOME THEM

Since the mass relocation of CSOs began in the summer of 2021, experts have noted the emergence and intensification of divides between various civil society organizations. These divides can be outlined as follows:

- Relocated CSOs / CSOs operating in Belarus
- CSOs Retaining Registration in Belarus / Dissolved CSOs
- “Old” CSOs / New CSOs
- Public CSOs / Non-public CSOs
- Proponents of Vertical Coalition Approaches / Proponents of Horizontal Coalition Approaches

The divide between organizations operating primarily from abroad and those remaining in Belarus seems to be the deepest. This gap, driven by both external conditions and internal capabilities and strategies, has been widening throughout this period. CSOs themselves recognize the existence and dangers of this divide and, to the best of their abilities, attempt to counteract this trend, especially since many continue to operate in a hybrid format, with

¹⁵ Structure and Prospects of Civil Society in Belarus: Status as of 2024, Factors of Change, Options for Development Strategies. 2024

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DI8cgBLpInsc33dBRH0rMxL654VhOhwL/view>

¹⁶ Cooperation Within Belarusian Civil Society: Will You (N)ever Walk Alone? Monitoring 5 & Research Report. BIPART, 2024 https://bipart.eu/picture/library/cso_needs_monitoring_5_-_cooperation_within_cs_eng_short.pdf

some staff remaining in Belarus. However, despite these efforts, the gap continues to widen (perhaps at a slower pace due to these efforts, but it still increases). External conditions also contribute to the divide, such as difficulties in obtaining visas in Belarus, the absence of flights and passenger train services to Europe, and restrictions on road transport between Belarus and neighboring European countries. In this review and other studies, it becomes necessary to separately discuss CSOs in Belarus and those relocated abroad, as describing their status, problems, needs, etc., with general characteristics is no longer feasible.

The tension between “old” and new organizations has eased over time: those new organizations that have survived and continued to operate have, to some extent, adopted the “rules of the game”. There may still be some differences in management, corporate culture, and methods of representation, but overall, this divide is no longer a significant factor for most clusters of civil society as of 2024. However, historically, the emergence of a large number of new organizations has posed a problem for the human rights sector, for example, according to “old” organizations. This has created difficulties in establishing common concepts related to human rights standards and strategies.

CONCLUSION

Since the onset of the political crisis in 2020, and up to the current state in mid-2024, Belarusian civil society organizations have transitioned from mobilization and hope for overcoming the crisis, through escalation of the crisis, persecution, and relocation, to a “new normal” characterized by increased expenses, challenging funding searches, and staffing issues, yet with the potential for growth and future prospects. CSOs remaining in Belarus have either suspended their activities, operate in an underground mode with high risks, or are involved in co-optation by the Belarusian regime. The working conditions, methods, problems, and needs of relocated organizations and those remaining in Belarus are now so different that studies address these two large groups separately. Overall, despite enduring this very dramatic period, and despite many losses and existing divides, Belarusian civil society has survived, maintained its priorities, and continues to hold potential for development and societal impact.