

Civil Society in Belarus in the Context of a Political Crisis: Current State and Challenges

Research report

(brief)

Overview

The paper analyzes the state of organized civil society and new initiatives that have arisen in Belarus during the political crisis that began in the wake of the 2020 presidential elections. Field research for this work was carried out from the beginning of 2021 to June of this year, that is, it does not cover the period associated with institutional repression against civil society organizations in Belarus (however, an additional post facto review will be devoted to this topic). This text offers a look at the state of various civil society actors in Belarus, what problems they faced in their work, and what kind of assistance they need. In addition, the situation with Belarusian independent media, diaspora and business was analyzed, and needs that were relevant at the time of the study were noted. These three subjects are considered separately, since their activities seem to be important for understanding the processes taking place in Belarusian society. At the same time, these require additional support due to the circumstances occurring in Belarus. At the end of this work, general conclusions are presented.

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Context, purpose and stages of research

This study was conceived in the winter of 2021, when it became obvious that the political crisis that began in Belarus after the 2020 elections was entering a protracted phase. The **purpose of the study** was to analyze the role of both existing (and established) civil society organizations (CSOs) and new public initiatives that emerged in the wake of the protest, to assess their potential, to analyze the main problems they face, and to outline their real needs and prospects for development.

Since beginning the study, the situation in civil society has undergone serious changes, and the political crisis in the country has not only not been resolved but has increasingly worsened. Given this, the research team was called upon to adjust some of findings, considering new information and events that occurred after completing the collection of empirical data.

Context. The primary long-term factor in the unfolding of the political crisis in Belarus is the desynchronization and multidirectional development of Belarusian society and the established political regime. Here can be discussed the development of a demand for socio-political transformations in society, which is characteristic of at least the last 10 years (after the 2010 presidential elections) and which became clear in 2020.

In the short term, the unfolding of the processes of activation of Belarusian society and the beginning of the political crisis, the obvious manifestation of which was the socio-political mobilization during the election campaign and the mass protests of August-November 2020, can be traced back to 2019. The first, not so clear stage was the process of “deepening integration” with Russia, which presented a new round of growing threats to Belarus’s sovereignty. The second stage of activation, which manifested itself more clearly, involved the challenges associated with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state and public institutions’ response. Without delving into an analysis of these processes, it can be noted that many of these, as well as the types of actions, and the role and place of different subjects, continued at the third stage, which can be understood as political mobilization during the election campaign and the mass protests that followed in August.

These two stages are characterized by a set of changes in the work of civil society structures and the nature of their interaction with other actors, among which include the following:

- Changes in coordinating activities and functioning of CSOs and business campaigns, which are similar and are caused by the reaction to the coronavirus crisis (transition to remote work, online processes, new markets and services in the case of business and new target groups or formats of work for CSOs)¹.

¹ Marples, David R. “Stalin’s Ghosts, Parasites, and Pandemic: The Roots of the 2020 Uprising in Belarus: 2021 Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies.” *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 1, no. aop (2021): 1-22.

- Losses in institutional and long-term cooperation and interaction between business and CSOs, conversion of resources (human and financial) into short-term campaigns associated with solving urgent problems, expansion of the forms and amount of cooperation.
- A breakthrough in the use of information technology in solving social problems.
- Redistribution of the spheres of influence of various types of media towards an increase in the role of independent media and “new media” and a drop in the level of trust in state media².
- A general deepening of the crisis of confidence in state institutions, destruction of the “social contract”³ and delegitimization of the political regime.
- Viral dissemination and scaling of initiatives aimed at solving urgent social problems.
- The gradual activation of the Belarusian diaspora, characterized by the transition from symbolic support for actions of various types to active participation in crowdfunding and crowdsourcing, including for those related to the coronavirus.

The level and character of public and political mobilization during the 2020 election campaign was largely determined by these processes and changes.

After the presidential elections on August 9, 2020, during which numerous falsifications and violations were recorded, mass protests began in Belarus. In the early days of protests, more than 7,000 people were detained throughout Belarus, disproportionate violence and lachrymatory agents were used against demonstrators, and detainees were beaten and tortured.

However, attempts to quell public outcry through brutality and violence have backfired. Massive protests continued until mid-November 2020, despite increased political repression. By the winter of 2020, street protests were largely suppressed, with many members of the protest movement subject to administrative and criminal prosecution and forced to leave the country. Most of the prominent public figures during the election campaign and in the first weeks of the unfolding of street protests were found abroad or in prison.

Despite the suppression of street protests, the situation has not stabilized and the political crisis has not been resolved. The government refuses any form of dialogue with civil society, continuing to spin the flywheel of repression (as of October 6, 2021, 801 people in Belarus were recognized as political prisoners). Crisis trends in the economy are intensifying, and international and sanctions pressure is growing. The available data from opinion polls show

² Bosse G. et al. (2020). Freedom of Speech and Media Plurality in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/Freedom-of-Speech-and-Media-Plurality-Paper-2021.pdf>

³ Douglas, Nadja. 2020. “Belarus: From the Old Social Contract to a New Social Identity.” Centre for East European and International Studies. ZOIS Report 9/11/2020. <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/belarus-from-the-old-social-contract-to-a-new-social-identity>.

a critically low level of trust in all state institutions and the persistence of a high level of social tension across Belarusian society⁴.

Target groups, stages of research, and data collection methods

Another objective of the study is to look at the changes in the role and position of independent media and business as important actors influencing the process of socio-political transformations generally and the development of civil society. In addition, special attention is paid to the analysis of processes taking place in the Belarusian diaspora, the activation of which in 2020-2021 is also significant for understanding the current situation and prospects for the development of civil society in Belarus. With the increase in the flow of refugees from Belarus, the role of the diaspora, new organizations and initiatives created during this period in different countries, especially neighboring countries (Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine) receiving most migrants, is increasing.

The events of 2020 became an impetus for a quantitative and qualitative shift in the state of civil society, requiring analysis and consideration of both the condition and problems of the “third sector” (organized civil society and existing “traditional” organizations of various types and spheres of activity), and triggered a massive surge of civil and public activity outside the framework of existing structures. Therefore, the focus of this study is on civil society organizations and “new communities” that have emerged in the wake of political mobilization.

An additional objective of the study is to analyze the changes in the role and position of independent media and business as important actors influencing the process of socio-political transformations in general and the development of civil society. In addition, special attention is paid to the analysis of the processes taking place in the Belarusian diaspora, the process of activation of which in 2020-2021 is also significant for understanding the situation and prospects for the development of civil society in Belarus. With the increase in the flow of refugees from Belarus, the role of the diaspora, new organizations and initiatives created during this period in different countries, especially geographically close ones (Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine), receiving the main flow of migrants, is increasing.

Stages and empirical base for research

1. Development of research program and tools: February 2021
2. Field stage (collection of empirical data): March-August 2021
 - Civil society organizations: 5 semi-structured interviews with CSO activists focusing on the development of the third sector; online survey of CSOs (62 questionnaires collected); focus group interviews with representatives of different

⁴ What Belarusians think about the protests (relative to the fifth wave Chatham House) // <https://newbelarus.vision/shto-belarusy-dumayut-pra-pratesty/>

thematic sectors of CSOs (8 focus groups held with the total number of participants at 67).

- Activists of “new communities”: 5 semi-structured interviews with CSO activists and experts who had experience working with “new communities”; 30 semi-structured interviews with “new communities” activists (“courtyard” and city communities, strike committees, independent trade unions); online survey of activists of “new communities” (663 questionnaires collected).
- Independent media: 10 semi-structured interviews with representatives of non-state media: internet media, Telegram channels, YouTube channels and blogs.
- Business sector: 7 semi-structured interviews with representatives of business unions at the national and regional level, business associations, start-up hub, and research center.
- Belarusian diaspora: 10 semi-structured interviews with representatives of Belarusian organizations located in three countries: Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

3. Data analysis and preparing conclusions and recommendations: August-October 2021

Changes in the conditions for activity, current state and relevant needs for belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs)

Belarusian civil society organizations currently operate under extremely unfavorable conditions. From widespread political repressions against activists in July 2021, the Belarusian regime switched to targeted institutional repressions directed against CSOs of various forms (institutions, public organizations, foundations, associations, etc.) operating in different spheres. The process of mass liquidation of CSOs continues today. As of the end of August, according to the human rights center Viasna, about 200 CSOs had been liquidated, but these data are incomplete and not final. In addition to the political, legal, and institutional environment, the economic environment for CSOs is also becoming more complex. Many organizations and activists were forced to leave the country and now conduct their activities from abroad due to the repression that has increased many times over.

Despite the intensification of repression and worsening conditions, combined with the fact that many CSOs are truly on the brink of survival, Belarusian CSOs continue to operate. Today they can act as one of the agents of socio-political transformation, at least by preserving the space of free activity and human resources both inside and outside the country.

The changed conditions of existence (environment) for civil society require abandoning the traditional schemes of CSO interaction with various stakeholders, including the state (national and local authorities), since all free and independent activity is essentially “outside the law.”

Involvement of “new wave” activists in the activities of CSOs or strengthening the interaction and cooperation of established organizations and new initiatives could contribute

to the development and strengthening of civil society generally under current challenging conditions.

In general, ideas about the current tasks for the sector can be divided into several blocks:

- Maintaining organizations and holding on to staff/volunteers, establishing work processes under new conditions, adapting to constantly deteriorating conditions;
- Support for civic initiatives and local activists; shifting the focus of activities to local community development and civic education;
- Consolidation within the sector and “authorization” of CSOs.

Preserving the potential accumulated by the Belarusian third sector over the past decades requires, on the one hand, new forms of organizing the work of civil society organizations. On the other hand, support to CSOs must be expanded, including defining new directions and developing flexible mechanisms for providing such support. Additionally, the organizing of Belarusian CSO project activities now should be made as flexible as possible.

“New communities”: real conditions and needs

The political mobilization of 2020 gave rise to many social effects, one of which was the forming of new types of connections and relationships between people, specifically different types of proto-communities (professional, generational, local, etc.). This process, which unfolded *en masse* in August-September 2020, was quickly halted by tough repressions against activists and participants. The “new communities” that were able to survive and continue to operate now differ in character and self-determination. Some are purely “protest” communities that see their sole purpose as changing the situation in the country, whereas others see themselves as the basis of a future system of self-government.

In less than a year (from August 2020 to July 2021), “new communities” have gone from gathering people who united in the course of a protest movement through establishing stronger ties and looking for legal forms of action and a “positive” agenda for change in their field (local government, protection of the rights of workers or students) to essentially clandestine groups that today are in survival mode and are under severe pressure from the regime.

The main forms of activity of the “new communities” in the spring and summer of 2021 were connected to helping political prisoners and their families while expanding their circle and media work. As political conditions have become more and more stringent since the summer of 2021 to the present, it is obvious that the tasks of survival and the forming of new “new communities” remain relevant.

Requests for new knowledge and skills of “new communities” activists are primarily related to the fields of law, legal literacy and security. Living under constant pressure also

requires a system of psychological assistance and counseling/training on topics related to behavior in extreme situations (search, interrogation, arrest, etc.).

The main issue in the development of “new communities,” in addition to high levels of repression, is a lack of understanding of what to do currently to move towards achieving common goals and a lack of established ties with other actors. The strongest ties are those with communities of the same type and diasporas and activists who were forced to leave the country. The level of cooperation with CSOs and political centers is equally low. Moreover, it is the local (territorial) “new communities” that are most “atomized”; trade union, student and professional communities have a broader and more regular network of cooperation.

An important role for activists of the “new communities” continues to be played by civic initiatives that perform several infrastructural functions, including initiating various campaigns, carry out educational and awareness-raising work (the “Golos” platform, the “Honest People” initiative, the BY_HELP campaign, the BY SOL Solidarity Fund, etc.). The original decentralized and “horizontal” nature of those protesting is preserved where political centers and other institutionalized structures are perceived as part of a general movement in which everyone determines their own actions and where there is essentially no hierarchy, coordination and management.

Non-state media in Belarus in the context of political crisis

The events of 2020 radically changed the sphere of non-state media in Belarus. Not only their role and agenda changed, but also their relations with other actors, ways of functioning and business models. The media sphere today is one of the most important in the development of political confrontation, and therefore non-state media resources are subjected to harsh repression, ranging from the persecution of individual journalists, bloggers, and administrators of channels and public pages on social networks and instant messengers to institutional repression that threatens the very existence of independent journalism in Belarus.

On the surface, there are resource problems faced by non-state media today. Foremost, this is a lack of financial and human resources, as well as difficulties associated with the forced relocation of journalists and editorial offices. However, no less significant is the problem of restricting access to information, as well as the need to significantly restructure activities, which requires, among other things, the development of competencies and providing new directions connected to the changing of channels, sources of information and ways of interacting with audiences. A separate challenge for non-state media today is the rethinking of their role in the current socio-political situation and the associated need to adjust editorial policy, devise new approaches and the basis for defining the agenda covered, as well as their relations to other subjects and actors.

The most relevant areas of support for non-state media today are institutional support, legal and psychological assistance, and the development of infrastructure for editorial teams scattered across different countries. In the area of learning and development, traditional

journalism education programs are irrelevant, whereas media management training is in demand as are sets of technical skills and competencies, the specific definition of which changes rapidly as the situation changes. This means that educational or training programs in this area today should be configured as flexibly as possible to respond to current challenges and needs of non-state media.

Role and place of business in societal transformation in 2020-2021

In the current situation, business lives and works in a “frozen expectant” mode with negative prospects for the future. New investments are not being undertaken (or “old” projects ready to go are ending).

The business community considers legal default to be a serious problem and would like to restore (or even establish a new) working legal environment as soon as possible. General working conditions (business climate) are also a serious problem, with essential inequality between state and private property, a lack of state support, non-payments, sanctions, high risks, etc.

Business considers interaction with the state toxic, but out of necessity it maintains a minimum level of communication. As for the relationship with the media, Belarusian business was largely reserved even before the political crisis and given the current situation it is trying to avoid public attention even more, expecting more problems than benefits from this. The upsurge in relations with CSOs and various initiatives is now over, both because there are very few such organizations left and because such support is perceived as potentially carrying risks of persecution.

Businesses are ready to take part in building a new economy (and a new society to the best of its ability, with individual businessmen ready to participate in political life as well), but they are not ready to be a driving force that changes the socio-political structure in the country.

Belarusian diaspora: its role and needs in support for Belarus

In the Belarusian diaspora during the period under study, processes took place that largely mirrored those that took place in society within the country. Specifically, at the initial stages of the political crisis the politicization of the diasporas intensified and their involvement in social and political activities related to the situation in Belarus increased. Organizations that existed before 2020 continued their activities and new initiatives emerged.

At the same time, as the political crisis worsened, the involvement of Belarusians abroad changed. Some of the initiatives that newly emerged continued their activities, whereas some people mobilized for the elections and then during the period of active protest returned to their ordinary life outside of activism.

One of the main areas of activity of Belarusian organizations abroad has become assistance to those who were forced to leave the country. Diaspora activists are also actively involved in advocating for a Belarusian agenda at the level of national and local authorities, promoting and supporting campaigns and other activities related to Belarus.

At the same time, Belarusian diasporas and activists face the same problems in their work as people/organizations within Belarus (including psychological burnout, the need to improve digital security skills, etc.). On the other hand, however, they are also forced to solve problems specific to the country where they are located (for example, with migration legislation in Ukraine).

General conclusions

The events of 2020 radically restructured relations in Belarusian society, affecting almost all social groups, sectors and institutions. During this period, civil society in Belarus acquired a new quality, where the potential for solidarity, civic responsibility and self-organization gathered over previous years was actualized in the wake of the reaction to the coronavirus crisis and political mobilization. The surge of not only political, but also social and cultural activity both in the country and abroad has greatly changed the image of the Belarusian nation, foremost among Belarusians themselves.

However, the unfolding process of the “awakening” of civil society in a much broader framework than it had existed previously immediately ran up against massive repressions by the Belarusian regime. The nature of these repressions is changing. If in the summer and autumn of 2020 active participants in political processes and actions fell under pressure and persecution, then in 2021 the regime switched to institutional repression and suppression of any activity independent of it or not completely under its control. Using this logic, vastly different groups and sectors are subject to restrictions and persecution: activists of the “new wave,” traditional and established CSOs, independent media and business as a space for free economic activity.

The conditions for civil society activities are steadily deteriorating in almost all areas, the most important of which is basically legal default in the country. The deterioration of economic conditions, however, as well as changes in the media environment are also important. The Belarusian regime is methodically destroying the institutional foundations of cooperation between different sectors and the infrastructure for the manifestation of any free activity, regardless of losses to the economy or international image, and without considering the social and humanitarian consequences for the country. Under these conditions, cooperation schemes among organized civil society actors are changing significantly along with state and other social actors. Cooperation with state structures at any level in many cases is reduced to the bare minimum⁵. This is a reciprocal process, as state structures and institutions are increasingly fenced off from society and public structures and business are looking to work together with them less and less. At the same time, in the field of independent activity there have been significant shifts in the forming of symbolic unity. However, real interaction (for example, CSOs with media, business and “new communities”) is today greatly hampered by both external factors (political repression) and the weakening of these actors themselves, as they have been forced to expend much effort on survival and adapting to continually worsening conditions.

⁵ Some public organizations, however, continue their cooperation. In exceptional cases, such cooperation may even take place with the participation or support of Western governments. For example, even though the Goethe Institute and the German Academic Exchange Program (DAAD) were closed, the J. Rau Minsk International Center will administer the next stage (2019 - 2022) of a program on behalf of the Federal Government of Germany, which provides for “**promoting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Belarus** by strengthening the capacity and competencies of civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as through strengthening cooperation between government bodies , business and civil society.” (For more details, see <http://ibb-d.by/programma-podderzhki-belarusi/>.)

An additional new circumstance is the forced departure of both people and entire structures (CSOs, media outlets and companies) from the country, which, on the one hand, expands diaspora activity and, on the other hand, requires the co-organizing activities within the country and abroad. Specifically, organized civil society is faced now with the question of both self-preservation and building its activities under fundamentally new conditions (often from abroad).

Today, the development of Belarusian civil society is determined by its ability to respond to three recognized challenges to varying degrees.

First, it is the preservation and replication of existing resources, including human resources, competencies and organizational resources. Solving this problem requires both actions and activities related to ensuring security, mutual assistance, leisure and psychological support to maintain human resources and capabilities, as well as institutional support and the development of new, more flexible and adaptive forms of coordinating activities, planning, technical and financial support of organizations and civil society initiatives.

Second, is the need to build sustainable relationships among CSOs, “new communities” and civic initiatives that appeared in 2020-2021 and that now perform significant organizational and infrastructural functions and run independent media. These are all actors who today are agents of political and social transformations in Belarus. The transition from symbolic unity to building a range of network interactions will not only ensure the preservation and replication of existing resources, but also position them to be better prepared for new challenges and emerging opportunities.

Third, is the activation of civil society, self-awareness as actors in a socio-political context, harmonization of ideas around the current situation and directions of transformation and recognizing one’s role in effecting positive change.