

Belarusian Civil Society Inside and Outside of the Country

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15 May 2024



Executive Summary

The mass protest mobilisation in 2020 in Belarus had a profound impact nationwide, fostering a general spike in civic activism. This development was met with unprecedented repression, affecting both previously existing organised civil society and newly mobilised individual activists, with many arrested or having to leave the country. In response, the EU and other international donors increased support for civil society. However, the EU should not just continue this support but also develop a more tailored approach towards it, looking for innovative and functional support solutions for the organisations and initiatives, especially those based in Belarus.

Introduction

The repression of Belarusian civil society persists to this day. Many civil society organisations (CSOs) are being destroyed; some have left the country and continue their activities from abroad, while others exist in a split mode with part of the team inside and part outside Belarus. Those organisations that have preserved their legal status in the country often exist and function in a co-optive mode with the state. The state forces them to demonstrate loyalty and provide social services that it either does not want or does not itself have the resources to offer. This co-option can be so strong that it becomes difficult to separate these organisations from government-organised nongovernmental organisations (GONGOs). In parallel, some grassroots organisations and initiatives in Belarus act in a so-called underground and low-visibility mode.

The war in Ukraine has a tremendous but also diverse influence on Belarusian civil society. The Belarusian activists and CSOs who relocated to Ukraine were forced to go into exile for the second time. Belarusian civil society has been and still is expressing a wave of solidarity with Ukraine. The war worsened the situation of Belarusian activists, who found themselves

in a forced situation as citizens of the co-aggressor state. That caused not only many legal problems (visa issues, problems with legalisation abroad, bank accounts, etc.), but also symbolic issues involving the attitudes of Ukrainians and people from democratic countries towards Belarusians. Given all these circumstances, exiled Belarusian civil society faces uncertainty regarding its future.

What is Belarusian Civil Society Today?

According to the type of adaptation and geographical relocation or exile after 2020, Belarusian civil society organisations and initiatives can be categorised into three groups:

1. organisations that have left the country and continue operations from exile;
2. organisations that remain within Belarus, either providing services and undertaking minor activities (if legally registered), or engaging in smaller-scale underground activities (if unregistered);
3. organisations that operate in a mixed format, with activists inside and outside the country.

Additionally, alongside the significant emigration from Belarus since 2020, Belarusian diaspora organisations and infrastructure for action have emerged in Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, and Ukraine (before the war). Some of these organisations focus predominantly on activities for Belarusians living abroad. However, in other cases, they act the same way as the organisations that remained in Belarus, but continuing to perform activities for the country from abroad.

From a legal perspective, Belarusian organisations and initiatives inside the country have varying statuses: organisations (usually social) registered in Belarus, organisations undergoing the process of liquidation, and liquidated organisations. Organisations in the latter two categories persist in Belarus as networks, horizontal structures, or initiatives. While their space for action is more than limited, they continue to engage in various activities, most of which have a nonpolitical and neutral character. These activities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ✦ improving communities and addressing communal, urban, and environmental issues;
- ✦ monitoring the situation in cities, identifying issues in communal and urban planning, and reporting them to local authorities;
- ✦ organising creative and socialisation activities;
- ✦ providing support to socially vulnerable groups and individuals;
- ✦ conducting educational activities;
- ✦ supporting colleagues within civil society;
- ✦ media activities;
- ✦ supporting political prisoners and participating in human-rights activities.

Repressive Environment for Belarusian Civil Society

All Belarusian CSOs and activists have found themselves under threat of repression. For those in the country, this means a direct threat of state violence and physical prosecution. For those abroad, the government uses a repressive playbook similar to the one that other

authoritarian regimes use, including destroying connections inside the country that remain among exiled civil society, monitoring, surveillance, penetration of online networks, judicial harassment, pressure on personal ties, propaganda attacks, and others.

Belarusian secret services received legal grounds for transborder repression with the introduction of a special criminal prosecution *in absentia*, changing the law on citizenship by adding norms for deprivation of citizenship, and other measures. However, the most broadly used instrument became the labelling of CSOs and activists as “extremists” and “terrorists.” These statutes allow for criminal prosecution of anyone who interacts with them. As of late winter–early spring 2024, the list of those labelled as extremists included 3819 individuals, while 181 entities were included in the list of “extremist organisations.”

One more dimension of the repression is the significant limitation of national funding opportunities for Belarusian civil society. These possibilities have always been limited, but since late 2020, they have been practically nonexistent. There has also been an increase in the risk of harassment for citizens and businesses that provide financial support to CSOs (including donations and crowdfunding). In parallel, receiving money in Belarus from any foreign counterpart under any legal contract has become virtually impossible, as it is highly likely to cause repressive actions. Numerous inspections occur, and criminal prosecutions for receiving funds from abroad are being initiated.

Problems and Challenges

In addition to the main problem, repression, organised Belarusian civil society faces other challenges, such as limited opportunities for organisational development, the psychological and financial well-being of its activists, and other issues. Digital authoritarianism and the limitations of independent media create external obstacles to the dissemination of information about the CSOs’ activities, thus creating additional problems. Not least, the issue of civil society funding has become crucial.

According to the existing data, typically, Belarusian organisations have mostly short-term funding and secure financial support for a maximum period of a year or a year and a half, with some cases revealing funding spans as short as just a few months. Most Belarusian CSOs have project-based funding (often with small budgets). As a result, they find themselves ensnared in endless application processes, with limited opportunities to uphold their sustainability and explore more effective and innovative ways to fulfil their missions.

Organisations whose leaders are still in Belarus and/or without relocated staff face the most challenging financial situations. They complain of a fundamental lack of funding and often rely on volunteer efforts to continue their activities. Following the events of 2020, some activists operating within the country have reported receiving virtually no assistance. For organisations where at least one member is abroad, there’s typically more success in securing funding and supporting those colleagues working within the country. Overall, instability and challenges mark the financial landscape for civil society organisations and their activists inside and outside Belarus.

Furthermore, problems also arise from discrepancies between the operational capabilities within Belarus and the project-reporting requirements imposed by donors. Adhering to the reporting requirements imposed by donors for projects implemented inside Belarus is challenging and occasionally impossible. Specifically, providing receipts and written

expenditure confirmations for project activities carried out within the country becomes unfeasible due to security risks.

Belarusian organisations that are based abroad also face challenges. The exiled CSOs that received legal status in the EU or other countries are much more expensive in terms of operational costs in comparison to what they needed while based in Belarus. However, donors are often reluctant to increase support for human resources, still focusing on the salaries paid in Belarus. Such underfunding leads to a situation in which organisations lose their professional staff, who leave for more profitable and stable workplaces. Moreover, the amount of funding does not make it possible to implement large-scale projects.

Conclusions

Belarusian civil society contains a variety of organisations and initiatives inside and outside the country; however, state repression has led to a significant change in its structure. The volume of services provided by civil society and the events they organise has significantly decreased. The Belarusian government, either independently or with the help of GONGOs, attempts to simulate civil activity and co-opt CSOs, but has not yet been able to offer any real alternatives.

CSOs inside Belarus, or those that are based abroad but still have members in the country, face significant challenges and are forced to operate with the lowest degree of visibility. There is a pressing need for support for organisations, initiatives, and activities within Belarus. This support, which is currently either only partially met or not at all, is vital for the survival and sustainability of civil society.

Despite not being under direct physical threat, the exiled and diaspora Belarusian CSOs and initiatives are frequently labelled as “extremist” and face transnational repression. Most of these organisations continue to focus their activities on Belarus. However, the support they need also confronts specific challenges that require attention.

Recommendations

- The EU should pay close attention and respond to requests for support from Belarusian CSOs and initiatives, especially those inside the country. The EU should continue conducting needs assessments and inclusive consultations with Belarusian organisations to determine the necessary support, involving activists and their organisations both inside Belarus and those operating within the country but associated with organisations abroad.
- Instead of focusing on a predominantly project-based funding approach, the EU should consider providing the option of institutional funding for Belarusian CSOs as a form of short- or medium-term assistance in its support programmes.
- The EU should take further steps to simplify the reporting requirements for the projects and activities they support inside Belarus (especially for the small grants) by streamlining demands and not requesting documents and proofs that can increase security risks. The EU should also exhibit greater flexibility in modifying projected results, as long as CSOs explain and prove why such modifications are needed.



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