

State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis

Monitoring: January - July 2022

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the second regular update to the study "State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis", which described the state and needs of CSOs in Belarus starting from 2020. This update aims to assess the current situation, as well as to describe the transformations that the Belarusian civil society underwent in the first half of 2022. In addition to the analysis of the situation of the organized civil society in Belarus, the report provides an overview of other studies that have been conducted on the topic of civil society in Belarus in 2021 and 2022, as well as the results of a survey of the grassroots initiatives and activists that mobilized or emerged in Belarus at the outbreak of the political crisis and, in spite of repression, still continue to operate today.

The empirical basis for the analysis within the framework of this study are:

1. Studies of the civil society in Belarus conducted by various authors and initiatives over the period of 2021 and 2022.
2. Focus groups (2) with CSO representatives from different thematic sectors and organizations working on CSO development conducted online in October 2022.
3. Semi-structured interviews (7) with experts and representatives of various ("old" and "new", located in Belarus and abroad) CSOs (October 2022).
4. Online survey of 116 community activists through one of the local community initiatives (September 2022).
5. Participant observation by the authors of the study, who are involved in various civil society activities in Belarus.

1. REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY OVER THE PERIOD 2021-2022

For the review of studies of the Belarusian civil society, the authors selected publications which, in their opinion, can help to better understand the internal processes. While we have tried to discover all the publications, it is possible that some studies, either due to their non-public nature or specialized focus, remained outside the focus of this paper.

The selected publications (about ten) can be divided into three thematic groups:

1. Study of the operating environment of civil society organizations
2. Study of problems induced by deteriorating external environment
3. CSO needs analysis

Let's take a look at the content of the studies in each of the three groups.

1.1 Studies of the environment of civil society organizations

The external environment of civil society activity is probably the most researched. Publications in this area concern the regulatory framework of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the actions of the state, mainly repression. There are also studies of the attitudes of citizens themselves toward civic structures.

1.1.1 The regulatory aspect and the actions of the state in relation to civil society structures

One of the most detailed and systematic studies of the conditions for civil society activity in Belarus in 2021 is the **CSO Meter report**¹, published by the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law Stichting (ECNL)² in August 2022. An analysis of conditions based on 11 parameters is conducted based on interviews with CSO representatives and expert evaluations.

According to the report, *the situation with freedom of association* has significantly worsened. The state has virtually suspended the registration of new organizations and liquidated about 20% of the existing ones, including the largest in their spheres. Hundreds of organizations are being liquidated, and many have reduced their activity under repressive conditions. The Belarusian authorities actively use legislation against extremism and money laundering to restrict freedom of association. The previously introduced restrictions remain in place as well. For example, foreign citizens are not allowed to establish organizations.

Problems still exist in the area of *legal equality*. Requirements for registering CSOs are more difficult to meet than those for businesses. Within the civil society sector, there is also an imbalance resulting from the introduction of preferential conditions for GONGOs (state-organized non-governmental organizations). The state creates special financial incentives for them. For example, a list of organizations loyal to the authorities that can pay only 10% of rent

¹ CSO Meter report <https://csometer.info/sites/default/files/2022-08/CSO%20Meter%20Belarus%20Country%20Report%20ENG%200-2.pdf>

² European Center for Not-for-Profit Law Stichting (ECNL) <https://ecnl.org/>

if the premises are owned by the state was published in March 2021³. Some organizations, such as Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), are funded directly from the state budget, while others can receive funding from businesses under a more favorable tax scheme.

There have been no significant legislative changes in the area of *access to funding*, but, as the authors note, their practical application has worsened. Funding of civic activities is considered financing of extremism, terrorism, and mass riots. Under the guise of combating tax evasion, the state further reduces the ability of organizations to receive funding. The need to obtain permission to receive money from abroad also persists, and there is no open and competitive system of public funding.

The report emphasizes that there is no *freedom of assembly* in Belarus. Peaceful assemblies are considered riots and gross violations of public order and are suppressed by brutal force. During the reporting period, cases of disruption of CSOs' events and arrests of participants were recorded.

It also demonstrates that the situation with the right of citizens *to participate in political decision-making* has deteriorated. The general atmosphere of repression has led, among other things, to voluntary reduction of interaction with the state. The state is also reducing the participation of CSOs in public councils. This includes, for example, the council under the Department for Humanitarian Affairs at the Belarus President Property Management Directorate and the National Council on Gender Policy. After the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) was liquidated by the state, the civil society lost its representation in the national public monitoring commission under the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus.

Freedom of speech is severely restricted, both in public space through repression of the media and on a personal level through punishment for the content of personal social media accounts and private correspondence. Acts of free speech and expression of dissent are qualified by the authorities as dissemination of extremist materials, incitement to hatred, propaganda of Nazism and insults to public officials. These restrictions apply to CSOs just as they do to political activists, human rights defenders, and any other citizens.

On May 7, 2021, the Personal Data Protection Act was passed incorporating positive changes.⁴ In practice, however, *the privacy situation* has worsened significantly. The security forces regularly interfere in the private lives of citizens, including CSO activists, such as during the recording of "penance videos" or punishments for refusing to unlock the phone. On the contrary, the personal data of security forces, judges, and officials involved in repressions is concealed. The rules for handling personal data are actually impossible for CSOs to comply with because of the specific nature of their activities. For instance, since 2021, some organizations are required by anti-money laundering and anti-terrorist financing laws to file extensive reports on their activities, income and expenditures. Some were forcibly liquidated because of technical errors in documentation or claims by government agencies that the reports were

³ Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 168 of March 25, 2021. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C22100168&p1=1&p5=0>

⁴ Law of the Republic of Belarus No. 99-Z of May 7, 2021. <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=h12100099>

incomplete. In addition, government agencies often demand detailed information about CSO members, which can then be used for repression.

The state does not *protect civil society organizations*, does not support them, and drastically reduces *cooperation*. In the area of *digital rights*, the trend is also negative: the state seeks to impose censorship and control on the Internet.

In general, the authors of the report describe the situation of 2021 as a continuation of the political crisis of 2020. During the reporting period, political repressions acquired an institutional character; a targeted campaign against civil society organizations was announced, and the government of Belarus demonstratively declared its withdrawal from the Eastern Partnership program, although did not actually do it. Many civil society organizations were shut down; arrests and raids were used against activists; people were forced to flee abroad. Overall, the conditions for the activity of CSOs in Belarus have significantly worsened.

Other authors come to similar conclusions about the situation.

For example, in his review published for the Belarusian Yearbook 2022 '**Civil Society: Total Cleansing While Maintaining Public Trust**'⁵, Vadzim Mazheika singles out five main trends of what was going on with civil society organizations (CSOs) in 2021.

1. In April 2021, A. Lukashenka and V. Makey announced the idea of eliminating the civil society. In the course of the subsequent "cleansing", the authorities liquidated 384 (at that time) organizations and launched a number of criminal cases. Thus, many CSOs lost the ability to legally operate on the territory of Belarus.
2. Organizations that were not affected by repression have become less active and less public, which affects the effectiveness of their work with target audiences.
3. Other organizations and their activists were forced to flee abroad and face the problems of reshaping their activities.
4. By Lukashenka's order, the authorities created controlled organizations imitating civil society structures.
5. However, public opinion polls show that civil society organizations retain a high level of public trust compared to government agencies.

The Human Rights Watch review '**Belarus. Events of 2021**', published⁶ in January 2022, also described the impact to which the Belarusian civil society was subjected as "cleansing". The authors document large-scale repressions in several areas of public activity at once. Dozens of human rights defenders, including activists of 'Viasna' Human Rights Center, have been sentenced to prison terms. In 2021, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) documented more than a hundred arbitrary detentions of media workers, with at least 26 behind bars in politically motivated criminal cases. Repression has also affected the legal

⁵ Mazheika V. Civil Society: Total Cleansing While Maintaining Public Trust
<https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2022/page13.html>

⁶ Belarus: "Cleansing" of Civil Society <https://www.hrw.org/ru/news/2022/01/13/380808>

profession, with the authors documenting at least 32 cases of arbitrary revocation of attorneys' licenses.

Lawtrend Monitor⁷ records similar trends in the dynamics of repression in its monthly bulletin.

The authors of **Building A Civil Society in Belarus**⁸, published by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation at the end of December 2021, also places the situation in the sector in the general context of political crisis and repression. The articles in this collection mainly contain a generalized description of the situation in the country and the repression of CSOs. Several articles⁹ emphasize the importance of international support for Belarusian civil society. The role of women in protest and in civil society structures is also analyzed¹⁰, while fitting this phenomenon into the global trend of activating women's movements as a catalyst for social change.

1.1.2 Citizens' attitudes toward civil society organizations

The publications discussed above are mainly concerned with the external environment of CSOs related to the actions of the state: repression, stricter legislation, and attempts to create alternative structures. In this respect, a useful addition is the 'Effectiveness and Influence of Civic Education Programs on Belarusians' study¹¹, published by the Office for European Expertise and Communication (OEEC) in December 2021, which offers an analysis of certain characteristics of another component of the external environment - the society itself. The study also has a broad empirical basis: an online survey of a national sample (n=1005), a survey of participants in civic education programs (n=53), as well as 4 focus groups with participants and non-participants in such programs and 9 semi-structured interviews with representatives of organizations offering civic education programs were conducted.

The study showed widespread but vague knowledge about civic education. Thus, the majority of Belarusians (70%) noted that they are familiar with this concept, and the most popular ideas about its content were knowledge of the rights and duties of citizens (34%) and legal literacy (23%). Both the population as a whole and organizers of such programs often interpret any non-formal education as civic education.

A fairly high demand for education of this kind was revealed. Half (50%) noted that they participated in such programs, another third (34%) would like to. The main motives are self-development (38%) and knowledge of their rights (37%). The main barriers are unwillingness to learn (26%), lack of awareness of such programs (22%), and lack of interest (22%).

⁷ Lawtrend Monitor e-Bulletin <https://www.lawtrend.org/?s=LawtrendMonitor>

⁸ Building A Civil Society in Belarus <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Building-a-Civil-Society-in-Belarus.pdf>

⁹ 'People on the Edge: Can Civil Society Save Belarus?'; 'Belarusian Civil Society Needs Our Support' from the collection above.

¹⁰ 'Pushing for Change in Belarus: The Role of Women and Civil Society', from the collection above.

¹¹ How Does Civic Education Affect Belarusians and Belarusian Women? (research results) <https://oeec.ngo/opinions/civic-education-research/>

The study also assessed the effectiveness of such programs. Although overall civic engagement is low, it is higher among those who participated in civic education programs compared to those who did not.

Thus, the study showed that, although Belarusians rarely understand the meaning of civic education, the majority does not have a negative attitude to it, and such programs allow to somewhat increase participation in the activity of CSOs. This can indirectly testify to the potential of Belarusians' involvement in the activity of civic organizations, but the topic requires a separate study.

1.2 Research on the problems of civil society organizations

The conditions for civil society structures described in the previous group of studies pose a number of problems for them.

According to a joint study by Lawtrend, the OEEC, and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) '**Pressure on Belarusian Civil Society Organizations During the Period of Mass Repression**'¹², published in November 2021, most organizations experience problems with their legal status. The authors of the study interviewed 108 people from 97 organizations.

At the time of the survey, the most common form of registration was institution (57%), with public associations coming second (32%). Among forcibly liquidated organizations¹³, the structure of legal forms is similar. It means that civil society structures experience problems with legal status regardless of the legal form. Among those surveyed, 62% reported forced liquidation, 34% reported raids, and 31% reported inspections. These are the three most common methods of state pressure.

The topic of problems of civil society organizations is explored in detail in the first supplement of our (BIPART) regular monitoring '**State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis. Monitoring: July - December 2021**' (2022)¹⁴. The analysis is based on data obtained after field research (a roundtable discussion with 30 CSO representatives, located both in Belarus and abroad, as well as 8 interviews with activists engaged in the development of the third sector). According to the findings, the main problem for CSOs during this period is physical and digital security. Many activists are facing criminal cases, while others are experiencing stress and psychological problems due to the current situation.

Another important problem is the complexity of strategic planning. Although some organizations, usually those that relocated themselves abroad some time ago, are already planning activities for the next 2-3 years, the situation of uncertainty is typical for most

¹² Pressure on Belarusian Civil Society Organizations During the Period of Mass Repression (survey results) <https://oeec.ngo/opinions/research/pressure-on-belarusian-organizations/>

¹³ 'Liquidation of CSOs 2021-2022' Monitoring https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qHDjDaoq1Fz9TnVsbTlh-sFbWP_4U1faraytI8AuKXM/edit?usp=sharing

¹⁴ State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis. Monitoring: July - December 2021 https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/cso_needs_update_2021_rus.pdf

organizations. Because of severed ties, a shift to non-publicity, the termination of cooperation with the state, and relocation abroad, many CSOs find it difficult or even impossible to engage with their target audiences.

The issue of funding remains relevant, given that the transfer of international support to the territory of Belarus has become very complicated.

Specific problems of organizations working outside Belarus include the need to prove that they are relevant and can represent Belarusians (for example, to send Belarusian students on Erasmus+ exchange programs); the need to work according to legal requirements that are new for them (for example, in accounting), as well as difficulties with finding new employees and current problems in organizing relocation and legalization.

Another aspect of the problems of CSOs was examined by the authors of the study **‘Working Conditions in NGOs in a Time of Radical Changes in the External Environment’**¹⁵. The authors interviewed 158 employees and volunteers in July 2022. The study reveals high stress on CSO employees: 54% experienced health problems due to their activity, 55% went to a psychologist, 74% felt threatened by the application of the criminal article on illegal activities of public organizations.

A significant portion of employees (40%) noted that, compared to the first half of 2020, today's workload has decreased, which may mean a decrease in income. The majority (60%) believe that the work of the civil society sphere is associated with lower social guarantees than in other spheres, 60% do not count on a pension. At the same time, CSO employees remain quite motivated: the average motivation is 7 on a 10-point scale. The main motivations to participate in the activities of organizations: democratic change, improving the lives of communities, and solving public problems at the national level. These data can also be correlated with the conclusion of one of the authors of the **Belarusian Change Tracker**¹⁶, where authors express belief in the possibility of improvements one of the important factors in the survival of the civil society.

The legal aspect of working conditions, in particular, the right to social guarantees, is analyzed in detail in Lawtrend's study **‘Labor and Social Guarantees for Employees and Volunteers of Nonprofit Organizations’**¹⁷, published in August 2022. The authors point out problems both at the level of legislation and at the level of approaches to this aspect on the part of the organizations' management and donors.

The Belarusian Labor Code provides for many guarantees for persons whose employment relationship is formalized: minimum wage, payments, timeliness of payment, etc. However, often due to the project nature of activities or donor policies, CSOs conclude civil law contracts instead of employment contracts, which provide significantly less social guarantees to employees. As for volunteers, their activities in Belarus are not regulated, which means that

¹⁵ The study is not published.

¹⁶ Belarusian Change Tracker <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19564.pdf>

¹⁷ Labor and Social Guarantees for Employees and Volunteers of Nonprofit Organizations https://www.lawtrend.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/labor_ngo_brochure.pdf

their rights are not protected. For example, this activity is not taken into account when calculating the length of service, which affects the amount of pensions.

Belarusian national legislation on labor protection does not take into account the specifics of CSOs. It contains strict requirements for internships, availability of responsible persons, briefings and other tasks regardless of the size and nature of the organization's activities. For many CSOs, this is a great additional burden and one of the reasons not to enter into employment contracts. The project nature of funding and the strict regulation of the process of transferring money from donors to final recipients results in a situation where it is difficult for organizations to accumulate resources, for example, to pay bonuses or benefits. Since human resources are fundamental to CSOs, improvements in the labor relations aspect could increase the effectiveness of organizations in achieving their missions while strengthening the civil society as a whole. To this end, the authors of the study included a number of recommendations for key stakeholders.

Thus, the research on the problems faced by civil society organizations in 2021-2022 covers a wide range of topics. These include the sphere of the legal regulation of CSOs' activities, organizational problems, issues of funding, legalization, and working conditions in such organizations. Exploring ways to overcome these problems could become a promising avenue for further research.

1.3 Research on the needs of civil society organizations

In the context of the changing external environment and the new challenges it has brought about, an important area of research is the analysis of changes in the needs of civil society organizations.

OEEC and Lawtrend released a study on this topic in January 2022 titled '**Needs Analysis for Belarusian Civil Society Organizations**'¹⁸. From November 29 to December 10, 2021, the authors interviewed 73 CSO representatives and individual experts, most of whom were working in Belarus at the time of the survey.

According to this study, the most frequent need, both at the activism level (71%) and at the personal level (72%), is for physical and digital security. This is followed by funding among activism needs: project support (69%) and institutional support (56%). Among personal needs, more than a half name health insurance (56%), obtaining legal status (53%), and finding housing in a new country (51%).

The study also shows that, despite the changed conditions, the majority continue to work from Belarus (65%), and the goals of organizations remained the same (60%).

Another study of civil society's needs is '**International Support for Democratic Belarus: Needs Assessment**'¹⁹. The authors suggest a classification of needs, depending on the priority. For instance, for the sector of human rights initiatives and civil society organizations, the short-

¹⁸ The study is not published.

¹⁹ The study is not published.

term needs include support for the repressed and the activists remaining in the country, as well as financial assistance and consulting for the CSOs that have fled abroad. Among the medium-term needs, the authors single out support for organizational and strategic planning, as well as strengthening ties between organizations. The authors also provide their own assessment of the sector's financial needs.

Thus, although the topic of the needs of civil society organizations after the outbreak of the political crisis in 2021-2022 is addressed in many publications, only two special studies are devoted to it. Their results provide a first approximation of the situation, but the topic requires a more detailed analysis both in the area of identifying needs and on the methods of their fulfillment.

Overall, it is possible to say that more than a dozen studies and analytical publications have been issued in 2021-2022 concerning the Belarusian civil society during this period. The majority of them are devoted to the study of the external environment, especially connected with the activity of the state: repression, deterioration of the legislative framework, attempts to create alternative pro-state structures.

A systematic review of the publications identifies several potential areas for further research:

1. Since most of the studies focuses on the situation in 2021, it is important to continue the monitoring by examining the events of 2022 following the campaign of Belarusian authorities to eliminate CSOs.
2. The aspect of the external environment related to the actions of the state has been studied sufficiently. Additional study of the internal environment is required - the attitude of citizens toward CSOs, activism and their needs in this area.
3. Existing research provides a first approximation of the needs of organizations, but further research could provide more detailed knowledge in this area. This can be both in-depth studies of certain needs and expansion of topics.

Most studies focuses on the problematic aspects of activity of CSOs. However, it can also be productive to study successful practices in implementing goals or overcoming crisis situations by different organizations. Such research could help highlight effective tools and strategies that can be scaled or adopted by other organizations.

2. ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION IN THE SPHERE OF ORGANIZED CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE NEEDS OF ORGANIZATIONS

To assess the situation in the organized civil society of Belarus in the first half of 2022, two focus groups and seven interviews with CSO representatives were conducted. It is necessary to note that conducting both focus groups and interviews was complicated by the fact that the participants were located in different countries, including some in Belarus. In the latter case, high security risks due to the sensitivity of the study had to be taken into account. It is indicative that a number of interview requests to CSO representatives in Belarus went unanswered. During the focus groups and the interviews, the participants expressed their opinions on a number of topics, which concerned civil society and their assessments of the processes taking place within it.

2.1 Dynamics of the situation in Belarus and the impact on the CSO sector

According to focus group participants and interviewees, the situation for CSOs in Belarus remains extremely difficult and is far from being normal. However, in some cases (mainly for organizations located abroad), it can be called "**crisis routinization**". The political crisis in Belarus is not resolved and the organizations operate in a highly uncertain environment. But the constant change of circumstances has become habitual, and some CSO leaders and civic activists living abroad have adapted to life in these conditions. Accepting the situation and planning to work in it is more common for relocated organizations: those of them that had not previously registered abroad in the hope of a quick return have now started to do so. They now have the opportunity to plan their activities under the new conditions. At the same time, representatives of organizations inside the country stated that the situation for them is still a "deep crisis" where only short-term (one to three months) planning is possible. In their case, anxiety, fear, and mistrust have not disappeared and have even increased, including within the civil society itself - between organizations and activists, which can be explained by the growing repression.

According to the data received, in Belarus, the authorities still allow some "surviving" organizations to operate. Thus, in the face of frustration, inspections and pressure, as well as the use of hate speech by officials and state media, CSOs are nevertheless able to continue their activities, and in some cases they are granted registration of grants and financial support from abroad. However, there are simultaneous signs that the authorities have intentions to replace the third sector and its activities with some kind of state (or fully state-controlled) entities. For instance, in February 2022, the first secretary of BRYU stated that his organization was ready to take the place of the liquidated CSOs, and in particular, to start solving environmental issues²⁰. In the same spirit, on August 22, 2022, Aliaksandr Lukashenka spoke about the need to create a single charitable foundation, which would replace the CSOs that used to work in this sphere²¹. The interviewees mentioned that, during the inspections of the

²⁰ Is it possible to replace the liquidated environmental organizations in Belarus?

<https://greenbelarus.info/articles/22-02-2022/mozhno-li-zamenit-likvidirovannye-v-belarusi-ekologicheskije-organizacii>

²¹ Lukashenko instructed to create a single charitable foundation, but under his patronage

<https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/20454.html>

organizations operating in Belarus, the inspectors paid a lot of attention to the operational aspects of their work. According to one opinion, this can be viewed as an attempt by authorities to adopt CSOs' best practices by copying the algorithms/procedures, including of reporting on and monitoring the funds coming from abroad, and then either co-opting or closing these organizations and creating a state-controlled pseudo-civil society entities which will accumulate all foreign funding coming for civil society.

At the same time, it was noted that, despite all the repressions, there were cases of registration of new initiatives in various organizational and legal forms (in particular, institutions) in Belarus in 2022, as well as cases of new registrations of previously liquidated organizations. Moreover, these initiatives were able to start their activities and even attract donations. However, these are isolated cases rather than a trend.

When discussing which organizations retain the ability to work in Belarus in spite of repressions, several assumptions were made. First, these are CSOs working in certain sectors (most often in the social sector), as well as with certain target groups, which are usually socially vulnerable groups of the population: children, people with disabilities, the elderly, etc., that is, with those who need additional services which the state is not always willing and able to provide. However, the sectoral principle only works when the second criterion is met - the head and active members of the organization do not have a "political footprint": a history of participation in protests and political activity (rather presumed/suspected by officials and government agencies than real). Thirdly, the factor of availability of legalized funding and its amount has an impact. According to the interviewees, in cases where organizations receive funding legally and the funding is in their accounts, the chances of preserving the activities of CSOs in Belarus are maintained. It is important to note that all of these factors can easily be leveled out by a political decision, and organizations that continue their activities in Belarus are still under constant threat of repression and liquidation. Notably, the representatives of the organizations themselves voiced doubts and reflections on the appropriateness of their own activities to support socially vulnerable groups, as this can lead to the stabilization of crisis (economic and political) trends, creating a "safety cushion" for the state to buffer the discontent of various social groups.

The repressive context within Belarus creates a situation where representatives of organizations talk about surveillance and control by the security services as their everyday reality.²² Also, several interviews suggested ideological control, where state agencies could have lists of "trustworthy" and "untrustworthy" organizations and activists who could or could not be invited to events, for example, at educational institutions. In addition, it was mentioned that government organizations and enterprises are forbidden to work with nonprofit organizations and initiatives, and that previous partnerships were terminated.

In addition, an outflow of human resources from civil society was pointed out, with people being forced to move to other sectors - particularly the IT sector - and learn new professions after their organizations were shut down.

²² One case involved an activist using the attention of the security services and "invitations" for conversations with them in order to engage in a kind of educational work, promoting a different value and even political agenda.

Relocated organizations are affected by the situation in Belarus due to the fact that many CSO leaders, employees, and members are unable to visit the country or meet with their family and friends, and some are under persecution or threat of persecution.

2.1.1 The war in Ukraine and its impact on Belarusian CSOs

By early 2022, the CSOs that had relocated themselves abroad had mostly "survived" the critical period, had somehow determined their further mode of existence, had launched the processes of establishing functioning, etc. However, in February 2022, the outbreak of war in Ukraine once again disrupted many organizations for a while, but rather psychologically. The majority of CSOs returned to their "pre-war" agendas and tasks as early as the summer and fall, although with adjustments and additions.

For some of the organizations and their teams during this period, the question of secondary relocation arose (from Ukraine, and in some cases from Georgia). The second relocation became difficult for organizations due to the direct physical threat to activists and their families and the need to leave the war zone, as well as organizational issues, such as the closure of organizations' and people's bank accounts in Ukraine and the need to relocate and readjust in other countries once again.

In Belarus, the outbreak of war and anti-war protests led to the emergence of another track of both civic activism (anti-war speeches by citizens) and repressive practices on the part of the authorities (even greater suppression and restriction of any civic activity). The institutional conditions for CSOs in Belarus are changing regardless of the unfolding of the war in Ukraine, but there are side effects that strongly affect Belarusian activists: objective (the sanctions policy, which makes the visa issue relevant in the first place) and subjective, psychological (feelings of guilt for the country's participation in the war, external appeals and related claims, etc.). Interviewees who are still in Belarus pointed to a serious value conflict when representatives of their target audiences supported Russia in the war. There was a strong frustration and an emotionally bitter understanding of the opposing values and worldviews of the people who participated in CSO programs/projects.

"On the perimeter" of Belarus, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine triggered the emergence or a new round of development (and sometimes revival) of a number of initiatives. One of the most well-known is the 'Belaruski Hayun' Telegram channel which collects and publishes information about war-and military-related activities on the territory of Belarus. In addition, several volunteer initiatives emerged that were created to help Belarusians relocating abroad. By the beginning of 2022, these initiatives had perfected a system of assistance and had developed some infrastructure, which was used immediately after the beginning of the war: both for Belarusian refugees from Ukraine and for Ukrainian refugees. As mobilization started in Russia, these initiatives also began to help Russians fleeing military service.

CSOs that had partner relations with Ukrainian organizations encountered problems: blocked accounts in Ukraine, changes of plans due to the fact that Ukrainian organizations temporarily changed their agenda or previously planned events became impossible. The relations between Belarusian and Ukrainian CSOs generally remained unchanged; Ukrainian

activists understand the situation in Belarus better and are often grateful for support which they get from Belarusian colleagues.

The status of Belarus as a co-aggressor country worsens the attitude to Belarusians in general, and this affects the activities of the relocated organizations and activists as well: a general more negative attitude, psychological problems, cases of discrimination, reduction of the level of support at different levels (from domestic issues, such as rent of premises, to the reduction of donor support, according to some activists). At the same time, it is important to note that these phenomena are not of a widespread nature, and Belarusian activists are mostly understanding of them.

Overall, Belarusian CSOs lived through the beginning of the war the same way they did in the summer-autumn of 2020: during the most intensive period, some activists, less often entire organizations, switched to addressing pressing issues: providing assistance, raising awareness, and participating in protests and solidarity actions. However, by the summer of 2022, most organizations and activists were back to their agendas. At the same time, one of the interviews stated that the switching to the Ukrainian agenda can be explained psychologically, because working on it brought quick, clear and, despite all the horror of the situation, positive results (for example, help for specific people). Whereas work with the Belarusian agenda and its results are often either not immediately visible or cannot be voiced publicly due to security threats.

A new element of CSO advocacy has been added: outreach and lobbying work with governments, politicians, media, and public opinion in their current countries to separate the actions and attitudes to the Belarusian authorities and civil society with respect to the war. This advocacy task is to promote the narrative that Belarus and Belarusians should not be seen as equivalent to Lukashenka.

It is also possible to point out another effect of the war, namely triggered Belarusianization and new regionalization. For many activists, the transition to the Belarusian language as a natural marker of distinction became relevant because of the need to detach themselves from the “Russian world”. Assistance first to Ukrainian and then to Russian refugees creates a new regional dimension, which may have further development in the future. At the same time, it was suggested that the war-induced relocation abroad of Russian civil society organizations could create and is already creating additional tension lines for Belarusian CSOs: both in terms of host countries not seeing the difference between the organizations and in terms of competition for resources.

2.2 Structure of the Belarusian CSO sector

The structure of the Belarusian civil society retains several lines according to which it can be classified, including:

- **Organizations that remain in Belarus and organizations that have relocated**

CSOs in Belarus (regardless of whether they have legal status) exist in three modes:

- 1) Underground or largely non-public activities
- 2) Adjustment / adaptation
- 3) Conservation / Anabiosis

Those organizations that lost their registration work either "underground" or find other ways to operate. Those organizations that retained their legal status continue to operate as they did before 2020, but under frustration, scrutiny, and pressure. Moreover, some organizations are more or less actively adapting to the new conditions, while others are drifting toward the previously described GoNGO type of development (such cases exist at least in the environmental and social spheres). At the same time, the interviewees from Belarus named certain areas and organizations that in one form or another continue their activities in various spheres, while not necessarily going into collaboration with the authorities. In parallel, there are also organizations that have completely stopped their work or are in a "dormant" state.

In general, activists and organizations in Belarus are atomizing, they drift into a semi-underground existence, and are careful about the number of connections and contacts they maintain both inside and outside the country. In the case of organizations that continue their activity inside the country, it is difficult to assess its scale and nature, as they avoid not only to report publicly on their work, but also to share information with friendly organizations.

The gap between activists in Belarus and those who relocated is growing. This is a common phenomenon, not only for CSOs. The difference in conditions and lifestyles makes it difficult to maintain unity even in the teams of organizations that are spread across different countries, not to mention partnerships and relations between those who have relocated and those who have remained in Belarus. The relocated organizations and diasporas are more and more focused on themselves and their own problems, development and building of relations within the community "on the perimeter" of Belarus, although they are still focused on working with the Belarusian agenda and, where possible, target groups within Belarus. Alongside this geographical division, the opinion was sounded that another significant criterion of the division inside the third sector and the whole Belarusian society is the belief in changes and readiness to do something for the sake of them. According to this criterion, it is possible to distinguish between those who are "desperate" and have stopped doing something and those who continue working.

Interestingly, during the interviews, people in Belarus expressed great bitterness that their colleagues who went abroad either consider them as collaborators or make statements about how there is nothing and no one left in the country.

- **Thematic division**

In terms of activities and subject areas, the structure of the third sector remains generally the same, but all organizations have suffered losses: liquidation of legal entities in Belarus, repressions against activists, mutations in the form of transformation towards GONGOs or Soviet models, freezing or termination of activities.

We can assume that the thematic sectors of CSOs dealing with gender, education, and culture suffered the most. At the same time, the human rights sector, although it suffered great losses, was structurally very resilient. The social sector has suffered less in the sense of formal liquidations of organizations, but at the same time it has very much "shrunk" and mutated. The organizations which are created to help and work with "relocants" (Belarusian citizens who had to leave the country) as the basic target group can be considered a new phenomenon in the thematic structure. It was also noted that, in terms of thematic areas of activity, many relocated organizations, which had never previously worked with human rights themes, switched to them or incorporated them into their missions. This is explained both by the difficulty of working with the "old" target groups and by the actual need to include these areas in various spheres (for example, for ecologists).

- **"Old" and "new" organizations**

The division into old, "traditional" CSOs and "new generation organizations" that emerged in 2020 and later persists, and in some cases the interaction between them in different areas of activity, values, and ideas is intensifying. It is noted that some new small initiatives, which did not have a sufficient level of security, were repressed and disappeared. At the same time, the surviving courtyard initiatives were described as trying to interact with each other.

The institutionalization of the surviving "new initiatives" brings them to the traditional framework for Belarusian CSOs: they become organized, build their management structures, begin to receive donor funding, and, according to some opinions, become involved in the competition for resources. At the same time, the active people who launched these initiatives on the wave of political mobilization most often came from other spheres and know little about what existed in the "third sector" before 2020, and often have little idea of the essence and values of civil society. This generates, among other things, some conflicts and contradictions among the organizations and activists.

The "new generation organizations" that emerged as a result of the horizontal mobilization of 2020 tend to be more active in PR and marketing. They actively occupy the information space, are less worried about ensuring the representation of different organizations and opinions, as well as taking into account previous experience, that is, in some cases act as businesses, "beating" the "old" organizations in the information field, according to some opinions.

At the same time, "new" organizations do not often get into traditional networking, although some organizations of the "new generation" themselves gave examples of creating new interaction networks between the "old" and "new" organizations, as well as among the "new" organizations themselves and with partners in other countries, including Ukraine. The communication of the "new" organizations among themselves, according to one interviewee, is facilitated by the fact that they include many people of a younger age, who find it easier to communicate with each other.

It should be emphasized that the assessment of the interaction between "old" and "new" initiatives differed depending on which type of organization the interviewees belonged to. For

instance, in one case the interaction was described as “rather rare”, while in another case it was referred to as “intensifying”. Obviously, these assessments depended on personal and organizational experience of the respondents.

2.3 The specifics of organizational activities: access to target groups, agenda, planning, communication and interaction

Access to target groups

The organizations that remained in Belarus and survived retain limited access to their target groups, although it is difficult. Both “underground” organizations in Belarus and relocated organizations continue to experience difficulties with such access. Contact with target groups is often difficult due to a general atmosphere of fear and mistrust, the widespread practice of labeling organizations, media, and activists as “extremists,” etc. Many target groups prefer not to contact foreign organizations at all, taking precautionary measures “just in case”. In the case of Belarusian organizations abroad, even informing their own target groups is difficult.

The problem with access to target groups had existed before, but it became even more serious in the first half of 2022 due to the expansion of punishment practices for contacts with undesirable organizations and the continued repression. There are cases of persecution of participants of the programs conducted by relocated Belarusian CSOs by the security services. Consequently, such organizations face the dilemma whether it is worthwhile to try bringing people from Belarus to events abroad.

At the same time, the target group of those who have left the country has expanded (these are children, relocated abroad CSOs, and certain groups of people), and organizations abroad have no problems with access to these target audiences, while the number of security risks in working with them is decreasing. Accordingly, in some cases, initiatives are shifting to working with Belarusians who have left the country.

“Service” human rights organizations can be considered an exception. First, their target audiences were initially partially hard to reach (for example, prisoners), and second, people seeking help from such organizations find them on their own.

Agenda

As in the past, organizations have generally maintained their agenda. Many held strategic sessions and revised their missions during the reporting period, and remained within the same thematic framework, except for the human rights component, which continues to grow in popularity.

As mentioned above, some organizations began to work with the Ukrainian agenda, but, in general, all CSOs, regardless of type and location, work with the Belarusian agenda.

Planning

We can speak of a more distant planning horizon for the organizations and activists that went abroad. They have accepted the situation and have engaged in planning within that framework, considering the planning process itself important. But they try to make it flexible and realistic.

Regardless of where the organization and activists are located, they are prepared for the situation to change abruptly and unpredictably. They are also prepared for the possibility that the plans will not be implemented as intended.

Communication and interaction between organizations

The interviewees talked about the fact that there is little communication and trust between organizations within Belarus. On the other hand, if limited "circles of trust" have already been created, then interaction within them can be quite intense. The distance between "those who left" and "those who stayed" increases, both organizations and people, even within the same organization. Relocated CSOs are more clustered by country of location. And in this case, the context of the country of location has a great influence on them. For example, it was mentioned that there is a lot of grassroots activist communication in Georgia, while in Lithuania we can talk about more politicized communication, which is due to the presence of strong political actors in this country.

In some cases (e.g., in the environmental sphere), the creation of new common platforms for communication was mentioned. There is also a better understanding among the organizations and activists themselves of with whom, on what agenda, and on what issues to engage. In one case, an example was given of how interaction between organizations to implement a major project was initiated by the donors themselves in a rather categorical manner. The interaction itself is assessed rather positively, but regrets are expressed that the organizations could not initiate it on their own and received an "outside push".

Funding

Most of the funding for organizations' activities comes from donor support. In the case of relocated organizations, cases of turning to foreign fundraising practices (Patreon, etc.) are observed more often. Increased financial dependence on donors is emphasized, as the use of crowdfunding in Belarus has decreased dramatically due to the expansion of persecution for funding various CSOs, which were then recognized as "extremist".

2.4 Main problems and challenges

It is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about the trends and problems of the third sector. **Multiple gaps** related to activity, lifestyle, and psychological state between activists who stayed in Belarus and those who left are being identified. One of the interviewees spoke about the misunderstanding of each other's situation, about "pulling the blanket over themselves" when, for example, Belarusian CSOs abroad say that it is no longer possible to operate in Belarus, there is "no one left alive" there, and those who do operate are "collaborators" with the authorities. On this basis, it seems that the latter do not need to be

supported. The topic of interaction with the authorities is painful and important for those organizations that continue to work in Belarus.

Organizations that work in a distributed manner (some of the employees relocated, some stayed in Belarus or moved to different countries) have **difficulties in retaining their integrity**. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has aggravated these problems because it changes conditions for Belarusians as a whole and for CSO activists in Belarus itself, in Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, and in the EU countries in absolutely different ways. Both conditions, challenges, and formats of work are more and more different not only for CSOs that have relocated or are staying in Belarus, but also for Belarusian CSOs and activists in different countries.

The distance between activists and organizations in Belarus and those relocated is growing. The location sets different agendas, different assessments of the situation, and different assessments of the risks. Inadequate risk assessment on the part of the relocated teams becomes a threat to those in Belarus, but excessive (according to those who left) caution on the part of those who stayed often prevents the organization from taking action.

Security risks to both CSO activists who remain in the country and those who have left persist, and in some cases are growing. These risks include pressure on families, seizure of property, etc.

Another problem is **the absence or lack of reliable information** about **what is happening inside the country**, both in the third sector and in society as a whole.

In general, a **low level of CSO presence in the information space** is reported. CSOs and activists in Belarus operate in a "mode of silence", if not underground. But relocated CSOs are also often reluctant to publicize their activities (because of security issues, colleagues or families left behind in Belarus, the "extremist resource" status of most independent media and many online CSO resources, etc.). The mechanisms of interaction with the media have been damaged, the independent media themselves have changed drastically, and the activities of civil society organizations are still not in the focus of their agenda.

The problem of **funding the activities** of CSOs remains. In the case of relocated abroad organizations, this is a high degree of dependence on foreign donors with minimal opportunities for other funding sources (donations, crowdfunding). In the case of organizations inside the country - difficulties with obtaining funding from abroad, problems with its registration (in the case of projects for which you can try to get funds to Belarus), etc.

Another issue related to the financial domain is **the problem of closing or difficulties with opening bank accounts** of both Belarusian organizations and activists abroad after the start of the war, when Belarusian citizenship became a sufficient reason for many banking institutions to refuse opening an account.

Inside Belarus, the problem is **inspections** of CSOs by various authorities. The number of such inspections, according to the interviewees, has increased significantly (an example of an organization that was last inspected more than ten years ago and has been inspected more than ten times over the past two years was provided). Often inspections are accompanied by

pressure on the management and employees of the organization and inducing them to cooperate.

Interviewees from Belarus talked a lot about **the difficult social and psychological situation** both in the country and in their surroundings, which has a negative impact on their activities. The situation of fear, uncertainty, confusion, loss of trust, an atmosphere of suspicion, negative attitudes toward each other and their target groups, and psychological difficulties were noted. The lack of public information about why and when arrests and detentions occur was mentioned. It is unlikely that such knowledge can help understand the logic of repression and take any preventive action in case of security threats, but it is probably necessary for some activists remaining in the country to rationalize and accept the reality around them. All of these problems are clear and understandable in the context of repression, but they create an extremely difficult atmosphere to work in.

The issue of obtaining visas is a pressing and significant one for activists both inside and outside the country, both for themselves and for their relatives. The war in Ukraine has worsened the already difficult situation with visa issuance for Belarusians. As a result, many Belarusian activists who are either in Belarus or outside the Schengen area have extremely limited opportunities to obtain visas. This only makes the security problem worse for people in Belarus, because for them the mere fact of having a visa is an opportunity (not necessarily feasible) to leave quickly if necessary. For activists residing outside of the Schengen area, the lack of a visa means not being able to participate in events held in the EU. The problem of lack of visas for relatives of activists in Belarus and abroad is extremely relevant. In the case of the former, it is important to be able to leave as a family; in the case of the latter, it is important to be able to meet with relatives. The existing possibilities to receive visas in the countries of the greatest concentration of Belarusian activists (Lithuania, Poland, and Georgia) are limited. Often, personal connections rather than clear and working mechanisms help in obtaining visas.

Along with the problem of visas for activists, there is a problem of obtaining visas for participants of events organized by CSOs. Often, those who deal with visas demand to guarantee the safety of participants, the absence of risks of their contacts with the Belarusian special services, etc., which in fact is impossible to do. This situation shows the discrepancy between political declarations calling for Belarusian CSOs to work for target groups inside Belarus and the *de facto* practice, when CSOs are unable to organize the arrival of people from Belarus to their events, which results in programs having to shift their focus to Belarusians who have already left the country. Replacing events with an online format is neither productive nor effective.

2.5 Relationships with authorities, political and other actors

Although in most cases - especially if talking about those who have left the country - interaction of Belarusian CSOs with governmental agencies and institutions has stopped, there are certain exceptions to this trend. For example, representatives of some organizations, which earlier (before 2020) interacted with state bodies rather successfully, claim that they still receive invitations to symbolic events or events related directly to their activity, where they may be asked to speak. In the case of symbolic events, organizations may choose a strategy of

nonparticipation in order not to legitimize such events and officials by their presence. A similar strategy applies in the case of state-run media. However, in the case of some practice-oriented events, organizations may participate and consider such participation acceptable. This again brings us back to the discussion about how to treat such contacts, but CSO representatives themselves consider them possible and not making them "collaborators" with the authorities. According to interviewees, those organizations that are not "under special scrutiny" are invited to interact with the authorities, which means that they appear to be safe to the officials organizing a meeting. At the same time, it was mentioned that, when organizations in Belarus need some kind of assistance from governmental agencies, they often encounter an extremely cautious and even contemptuous attitude, when officials consider them "enemies" (noting that such a trend existed before, but it has intensified recently).

Meanwhile, representatives of organizations working in Belarus confess that they also have a form of "interaction" that they cannot particularly refuse. These are, first of all, various inspections and summonses.

Among interesting points concerning the policy of the Belarusian authorities with regard to CSOs, we can mention the following. One interviewee shared that there were numerous meetings for local government officials in 2022 on how to attract foreign aid. Although it is not quite clear from which organizations this assistance is supposed to be received. At the same time, at least one of the major international organizations - the UN - and its associated structural units continue to work quite actively in Belarus, declaring, among other things, interaction with civil society with a certain degree of cynicism.²³

With regard to interaction with business inside the country, activists there said that it was no longer possible to get support from state enterprises for any private initiatives (for example, in the art sphere). Examples were provided of state enterprises initially agreeing to this, and then being forced to refuse such cooperation. It was also noted that while previously (before 2020) there were some opportunities to receive donations from entrepreneurs, today they are afraid to do so. In addition, the ability of businesses themselves to afford it has decreased.

Belarusian CSO representatives have different opinions regarding opposition democratic structures. Cooperation with them remains limited. An opinion was also expressed about the distancing of many CSOs from political structures and working exclusively with their own agenda. However, it is recognized that political actors can (and already do) influence the allocation and, according to interviewees, the distribution of donor support in the sector. Therefore, communication can be built between CSOs and political structures. There are also examples of CSO engagement with policymakers: for example, preparing an alternative report on the implementation by the Republic of Belarus of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²⁴

²³ For example, the celebration of UN Day, which was attended by the deputy foreign minister of Belarus and where it was mentioned that the event was also attended by CSOs <https://www.belta.by/society/view/den-oon-otmetili-v-belarusi-531173-2022/>

²⁴ For more see: <https://belhelcom.org/en/news/alternative-reports-implementation-republic-belarus-sdg-16-and-2030-agenda-whole>

2.6 CSO support needs

The main needs remain the same: **capacity building, management development and competence enhancement, and ensuring security**. The need to develop/improve security policies for organizations: support for the development of protocols, algorithms of action for both activists and participants in their activities was mentioned.

There is also a request from organizations both inside and outside Belarus (but especially in the former case) **to support strategic retreats**, as well as short- or even medium-term rehabilitation programs that not only activists but also their families can go to. Rehabilitation programs are relevant for all Belarusian activists regardless of their place of residence. Psychological help, combating burnout, etc., is still in demand. Among the actively voiced needs is **visa support** both for activists and their families inside Belarus, and for families of the relocated activists.

The requirements to support mechanisms (in the part where they are clear) also do not change: **flexible financing, institutional support, minimization and optimization of reporting**, especially documentary, real (rather than formal) **assessment of the risks of project implementation, compliance with information security** by donors and partner organizations. Examples were given of donor organizations communicating with grantees in a completely anonymous format, which makes them feel uneasy because it turns out that the donor side knows almost everything about the activists and they do not even understand who they are communicating with.

Separately, **the need to consider relocation of organizations and activists when planning the amount of donor support** is emphasized. Attention is drawn to the fact that previously allocated amounts for organizations are insufficient when CSOs relocate and start operating abroad. Taking into account the higher cost of living and taxes is also necessary when calculating salaries for Belarusian activists and activists abroad. Since many of them are *de facto* political refugees, they cannot dispose of their own property in Belarus, which is often seized or confiscated, all this creates a situation of even greater financial instability.

In the case of liquidation of an organization inside Belarus, financial support for this purpose is needed, as it also requires certain expenses. There was also a suggestion to allocate a kind of “individual assistance packages” in case an organization is closed, and people need several months to recover and find a new job. In addition, there is **a need for retraining programs and obtaining new qualifications** for people who had to leave the third sector or move to another country. There were also ideas to support individual experts (people with expertise in certain areas) in case they lost their jobs in the sector.

It was suggested that there should be a kind of **audit to see if there is a need for compensation or purchase of equipment** (computers, phones, tablets, etc.) when they have been seized.

For in-country organizations, **support to pay rent on premises** is still relevant.

There is a demand for **free language courses or payment support for language courses** among the activists who have relocated.

Among the important needs that one of the interviewees mentioned was **the need to know about the results of donor-led (quite numerous) needs assessments**. Because, according to him, there is currently an impression that once assessments are conducted, their results are either not used at all or used in a limited way. It was noted that the opinions of potential recipients are not sufficiently taken into account when shaping aid policies.

In a number of cases, interviewees spoke about prioritizing support for educational activities and the growing demand for them from society. This was noted, in particular, by ecologists and organizations working on local self-governance. However, it is an open question whether this is actually an increase in demand from target groups or it is an increase in supply because online education is one of the few remaining opportunities to connect with target groups and fulfill a mission.

2.7 Satisfaction with existing support programs and donor relations

International support programs remain the main source of funding for Belarusian CSOs. It is possible that, in the medium term, the effect of the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the redistribution of donor resources will have an impact. However, as of today it looks like the resources allocated by various donors to support CSOs are sufficient, if not excessive. This opinion was voiced by those who are abroad, the opinion of interviewees in Belarus on this matter was different, they spoke about the lack of support, and in some cases even the lack of knowledge about support programs, as well as increased competition for donor resources.

Problems often arise related to using funds, especially when it comes to activities in Belarus, where further changes in legislation are announced that may finally delegitimize any financial support for public activities and the activities of CSOs. Moreover, some organizations (especially in the social sector, local development, local communities) obviously will not be able to use any other mechanisms for obtaining resources other than legal ones.

In general, both "old" and "new" CSOs reported that many have developed positive and functional relationships with donors. What is important in this regard is the flexibility of donor organizations, their willingness to act according to the requests they receive. At the same time, it was mentioned that large foundations often do not make such compromises and continue to demand from Belarusian organizations full accountability and transparency, including lists of participants, passport data, etc. As a result, there is a situation when it is easier for organizations to work with relocated Belarusians than with target groups inside the country.

It was suggested that support from donors for Belarusians and Belarusian organizations and projects is decreasing because some donors are refocusing their programs on Ukraine. This is viewed as a reasonable and understandable step, but it causes concern to a number of interviewees. However, other interviewees did not share this assessment and spoke about the same level of support for Belarus.

It was also stated that it was, and probably still is, a certain challenge for donors to verify the "new" structures that emerged in 2020 and beyond. At the same time, the values of the leaders and members of these new structures can be very different. Diversity increased after the outbreak of war, when both paramilitary and volunteer structures and initiatives supporting their activities emerged. In general, it has been pointed out that donors navigate these structures, but this can cause some difficulties.

Thus, the materials of focus groups and interviews demonstrate the existing and aggravating discrepancies between those in the civil society who stayed in Belarus and those who left. These groups of organizations and activists have different modalities of existence and activity, problems, and needs. The war in Ukraine has obviously had a great impact on the Belarusian civil society, regardless of the location of organizations, but this effect is reflected in multiple and diverse consequences. The main needs of CSOs remain in the realm of organizational and institutional support, the expectation of flexibility from donors given the complex context, as well as requests for security assistance, psychological support, and a variety of individual-level support (from sufficient pay to visas for activists and their relatives). The situation of organizations in Belarus remains more than complex and critical, with trends towards a possible even greater negative state influence on the civil society sphere.

3. GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS AND COMMUNITIES: SURVEY RESULTS

To analyze the areas, problems, and needs of grassroots communities and activists in Belarus, we surveyed 116 activists. The survey was conducted electronically from September 20 to 26, 2022, with the help of an initiative dealing with local communities.

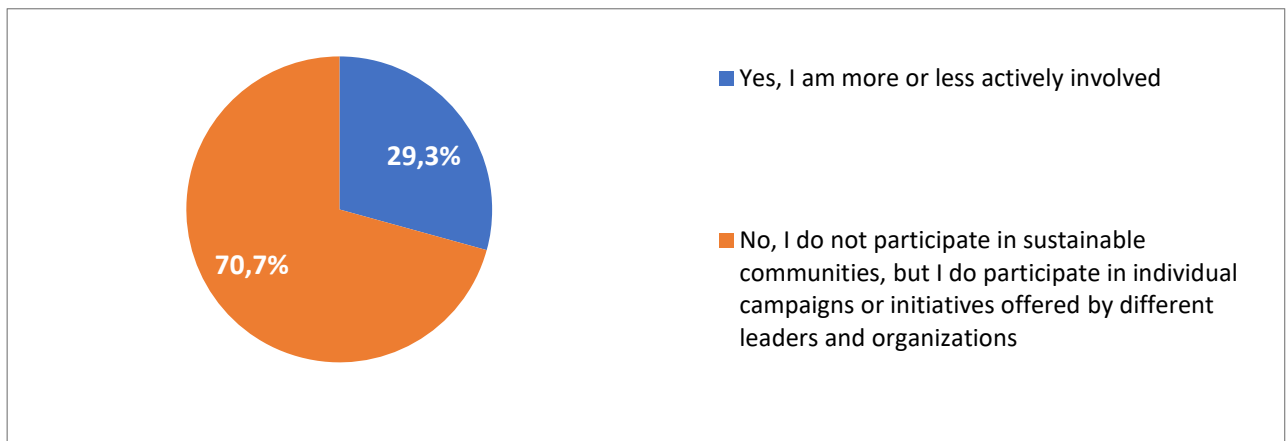
To analyze the dynamics of grassroots communities, we compare our findings with the results of our July 2021 survey²⁵.

Since there is no information about the population (we do not know the real demographic and other characteristics of all participants in grassroots communities), we cannot speak about the representativeness of the sample obtained. However, in terms of socio-demographic profile, it corresponds to the protest audience according to the National Poll²⁶. Thus, according to the answers received, we can judge about the situation in the activist environment, which is formed among this protest part of society. Middle-aged people with higher education (81%) and residents of Minsk (58% of those in Belarus) prevail among the respondents.

Most of the respondents live in Belarus (72%), some live abroad (25%). About a third of respondents (29%) are members of sustainable communities, and the majority (71%) are involved in individual campaigns and initiatives (Fig. 1).

Demographics of the survey participants can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 1. Do you participate in any sustainable (established some time ago, meeting regularly) communities or initiatives (neighborhood or "courtyard" community, independent trade union, professional or student community, etc.)?



According to the level of involvement in activism, we divided the audience into two parts. The first section presents an analysis of the situation in grassroots communities based on

²⁵ "New communities": current state and needs / BIPART // Civil society in Belarus in a situation of political crisis: state and challenges: report on study results. - 2021. - pp. 29-54. https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/needs_assessment_full_survey_full_version_rus_0.pdf

²⁶ National Poll <https://narodny-opros.net/>, 2022.

the responses of their active participants (29%). The second section presents an analysis of the situation in activism based on the responses of individual activists (71%).

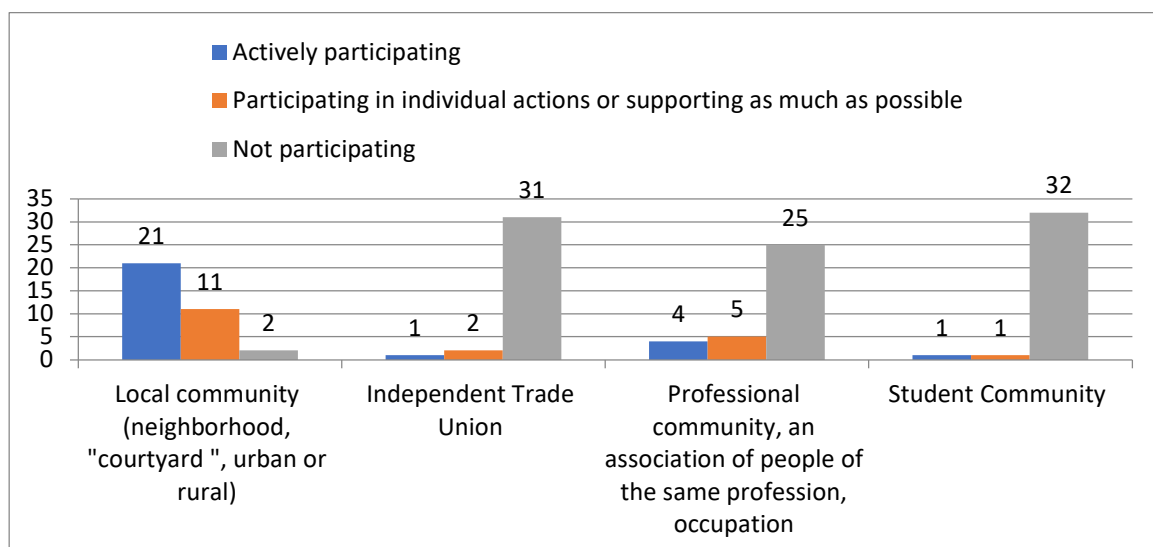
3.1 The situation in activist communities

In the first part of this section, we will analyze the activities of grassroots communities, their types, activities, and connections, and in the second part, their problems and needs. The most popular form of associations are local communities, engaged mainly in support of the repressed and informational work. Their problems and needs are mainly related to the difficulties of operating in a repressive environment.

The most popular form of grassroots associations among respondents is local communities (Figure 2). Sixty-two percent actively participate in them, and another 32% get involved in individual actions and support them to the best of their ability. The second place is occupied by professional communities, in which 26% of respondents are involved in one way or another.

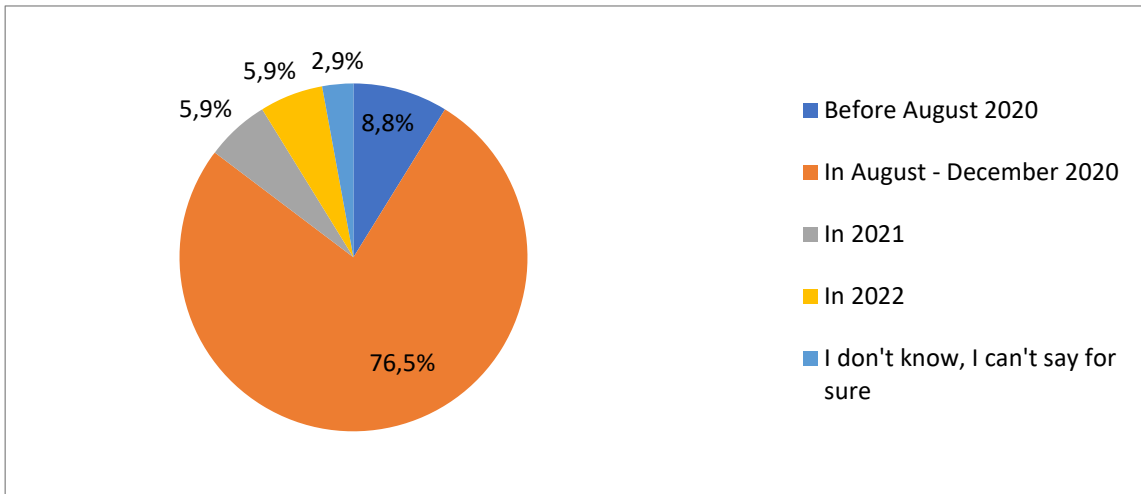
The data presented in this section mainly reflect the situation in local communities: courtyard and neighborhood associations. 79% of respondents gave responses about them - this is the number of respondents who consider activity in such communities as their main activity. Another 9% responded about their professional associations and 6% - about cultural initiatives and diasporas.

Figure 2. What communities or initiatives do you participate in? (people)



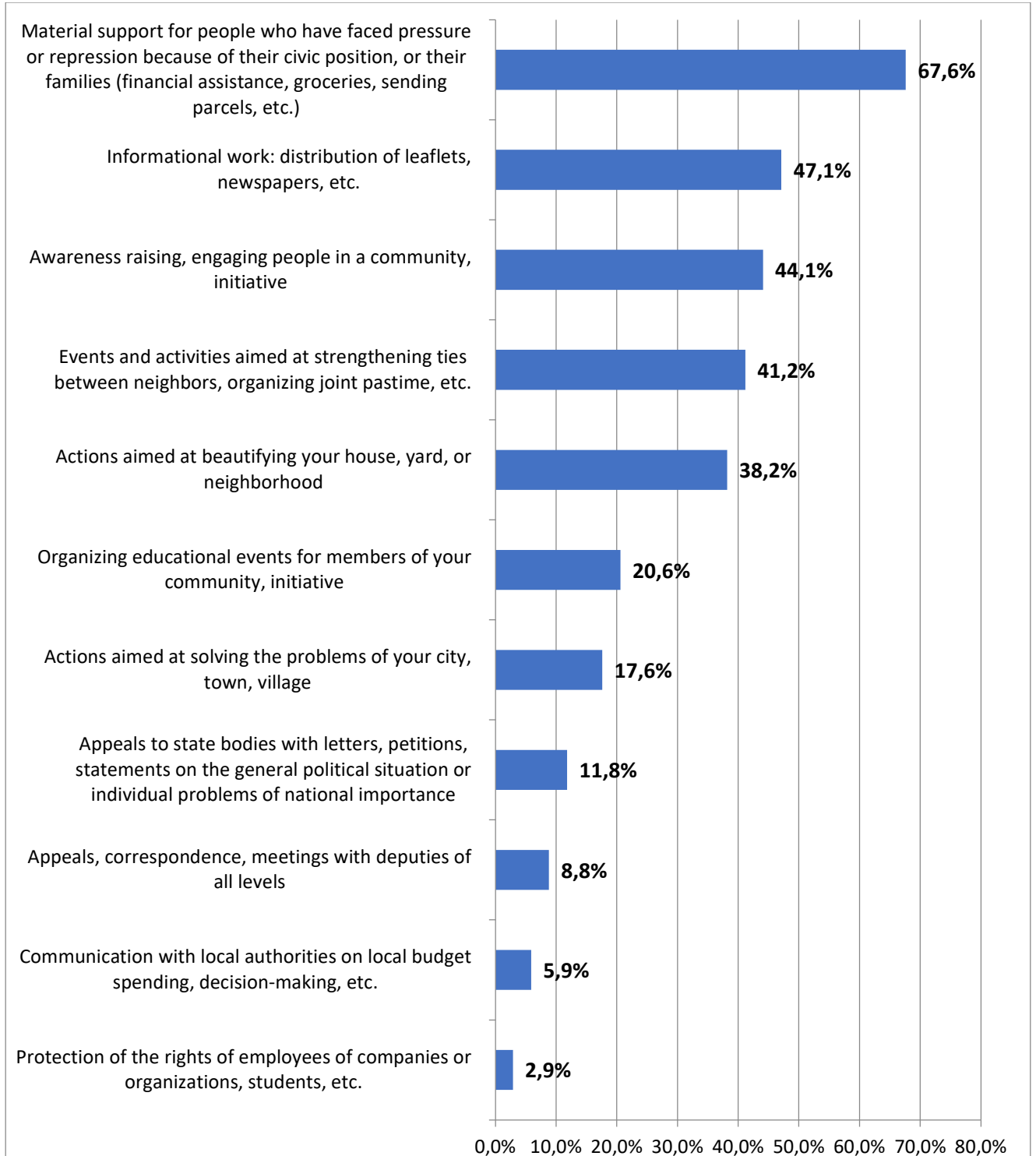
The vast majority (76%) indicated that their community was created between August and December 2020 (Figure 3), which corresponds to the peak of the emergence of courtyard communities.

Figure 3. How long ago was your community or initiative created??



In the last three months, grassroots communities were most often engaged in providing material support for the repressed, it is mentioned by 68% of respondents (Fig. 4). Informational (47%) and educational (44%) work, strengthening neighborhood ties (41%), and neighborhood beautification (38%) were also common. Compared to the last year, communities no longer held actions of solidarity with political prisoners, otherwise the list of the most common activities remained unchanged.

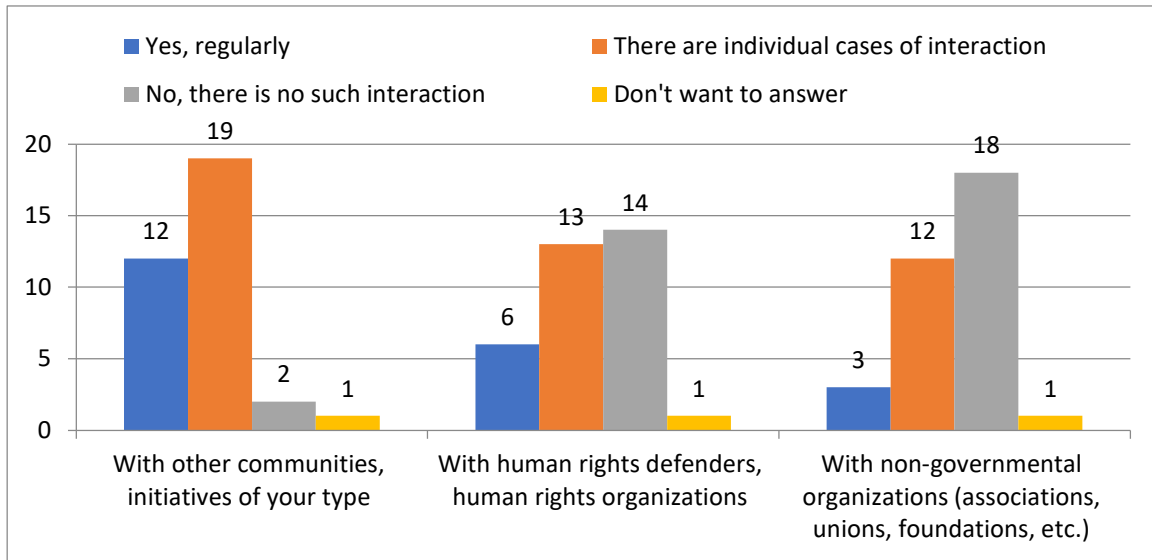
Figure 4. What areas or forms of activity have your community or initiative pursued over the last three months?



Some communities (20%) plan to expand activity, for example, in the areas of printed products, support for Ukraine, Belarusian culture, “green” topics, and self-organization of diasporas.

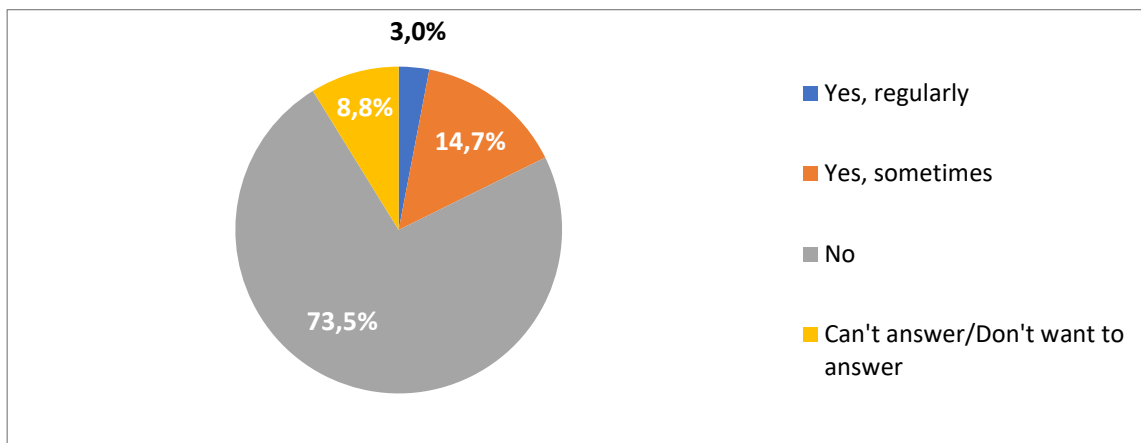
Most communities interact with associations from their own sphere (Figure 5): 35% on an ongoing basis and 56% occasionally. There is also cooperation with human rights defenders (56% with varying degrees of intensity) and community organizations (44%).

Figure 5. Does your community, initiative interact with other organizations and communities?



Communities interact with businesses much less frequently: only 18% do so at least occasionally (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Does your community interact with businesses?

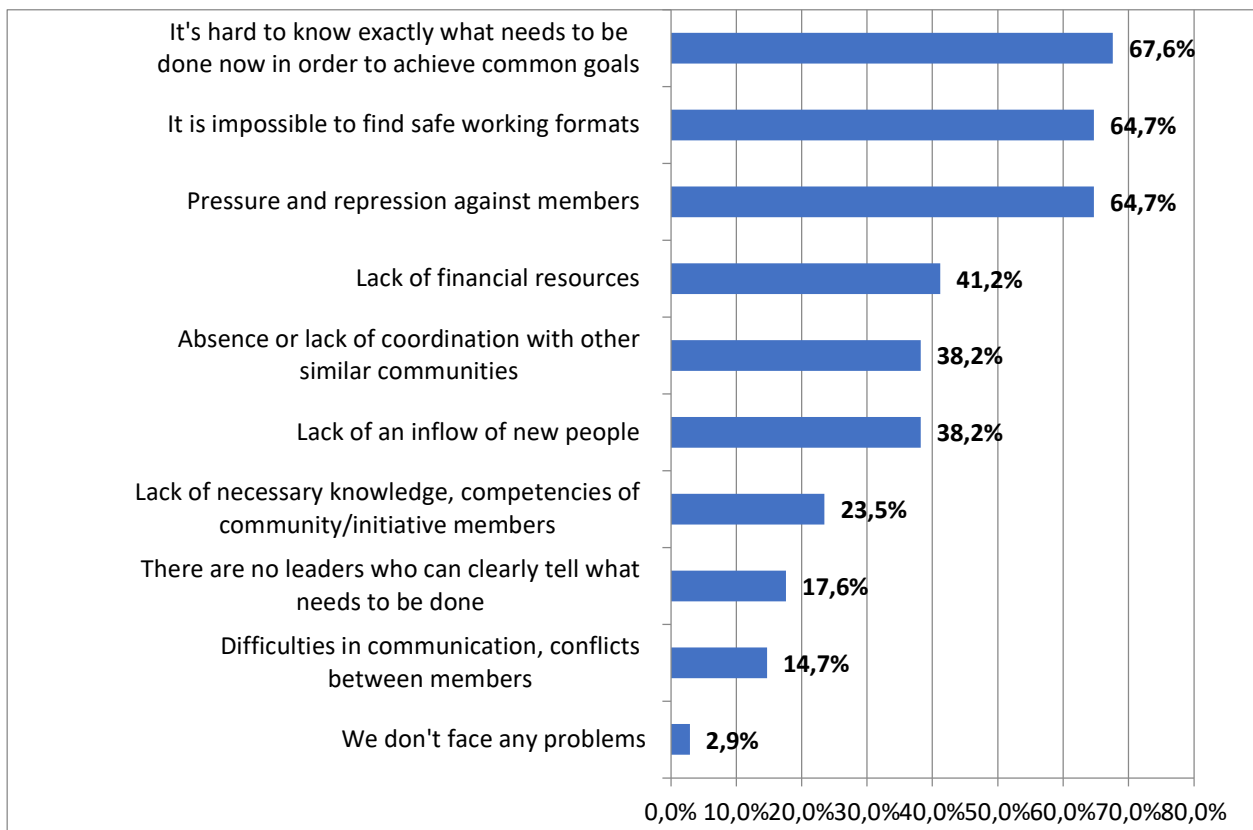


Thus, the most common form of grassroots associations among those surveyed are local communities created between August and December 2020. The communities are mainly engaged in assistance to the repressed, educational and outreach activities, strengthening neighborhood relations, and improvement of their local environment. Almost all grassroots communities interact with similar associations, about half with human rights activists and civic organizations, and only a small portion interacts with businesses.

3.2 Communities' problems and needs

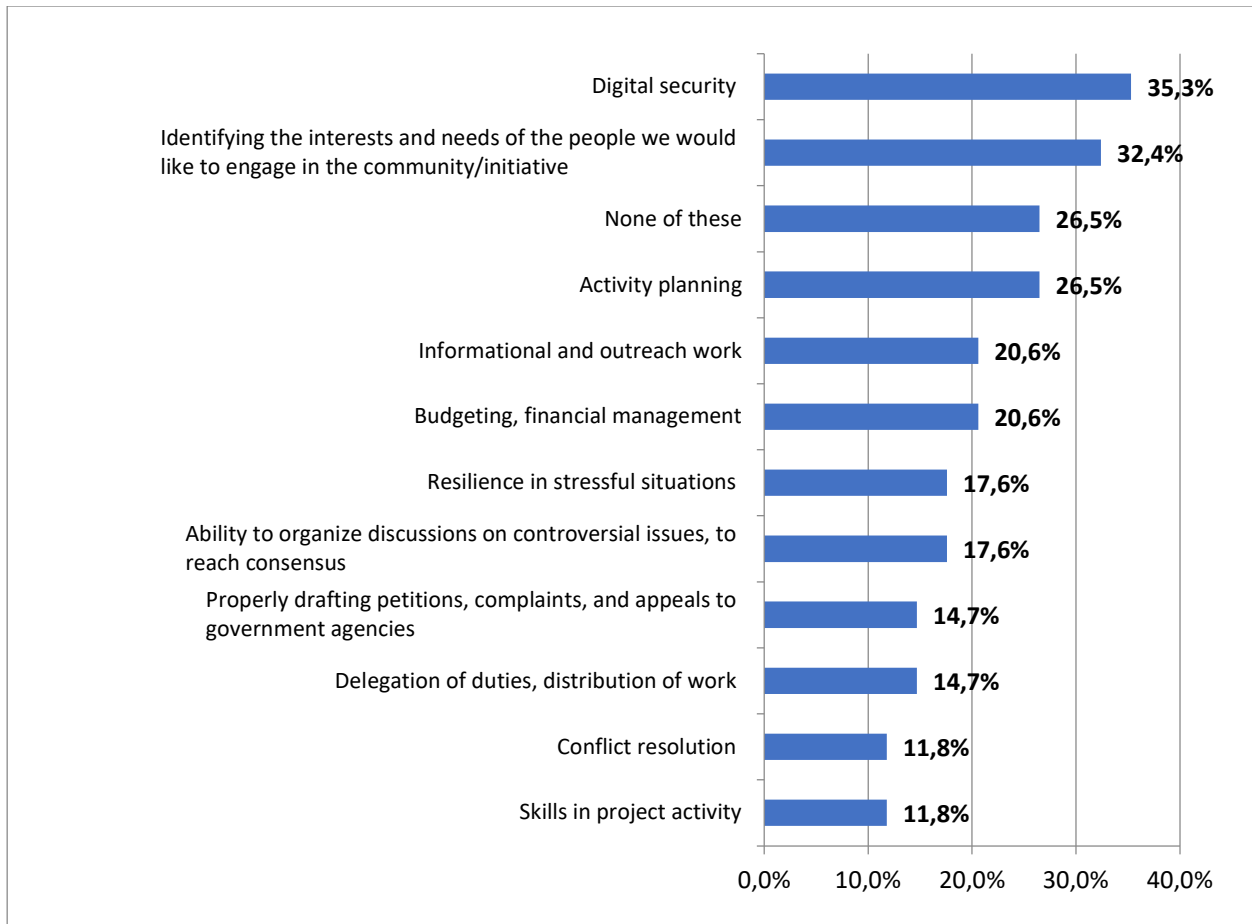
The main problem of grassroots communities is the lack of knowledge about effective forms of activity (68%). This is probably due to the difficulty of operating in a repressive environment: 65% of respondents noted the inability to find a safe format of work and the same percentage noted the problem of repression against community members. More than a third of respondents also noted a lack of funding, a lack of coordination with other communities, and a lack of an inflow of new people (Figure 7). Compared to 2021, repression and lack of effective forms of action remain among the most common, and the lack of safe ways to act has become even more acute.

Figure 7. What are the main challenges your community/initiative faces today?



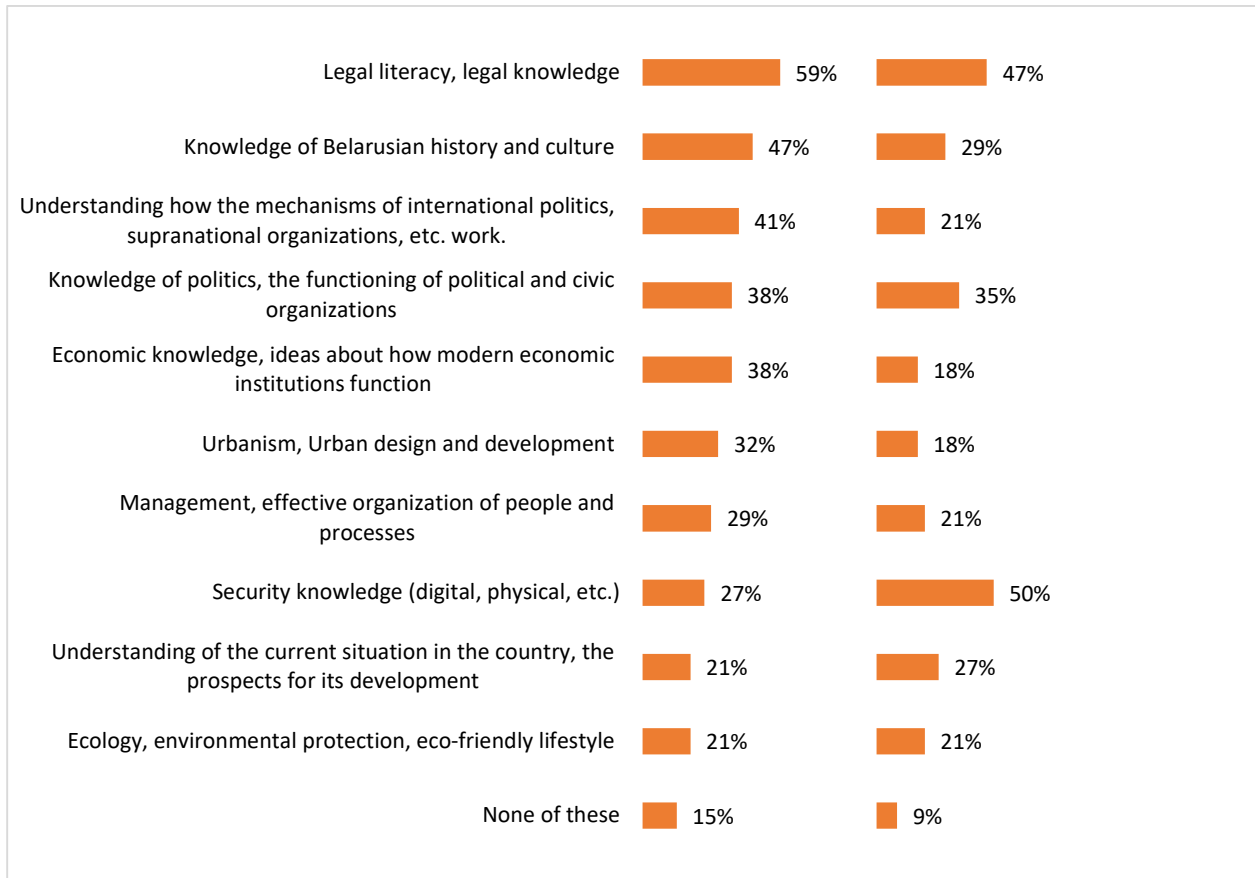
23% of the activists surveyed named the lack of competencies of community members among the topical problems. The most in-demand skills are digital security (35%) and the ability to identify target audience interests (32%). The need for planning skills (26%), outreach skills (21%), and financial management skills (21%) are also common (Figure 8). The need for digital security skills remains at the top of the list since last year, while the demand for outreach and communication skills has slightly decreased.

Figure 8. What practical knowledge/skills do you and your community/initiative members lack?



Among knowledge, legal literacy is most in demand: 59% indicate their own need and 47% believe that this kind of knowledge is lacking among other community members (Figure 9). Security knowledge comes second, with activists feeling the lack of such knowledge much more often among others (50%) than for themselves (27%). Grassroots activists also express significant interest in learning about Belarusian history and culture, international relations, and political institutions. The most common knowledge needs have not changed since the last survey in July 2021.

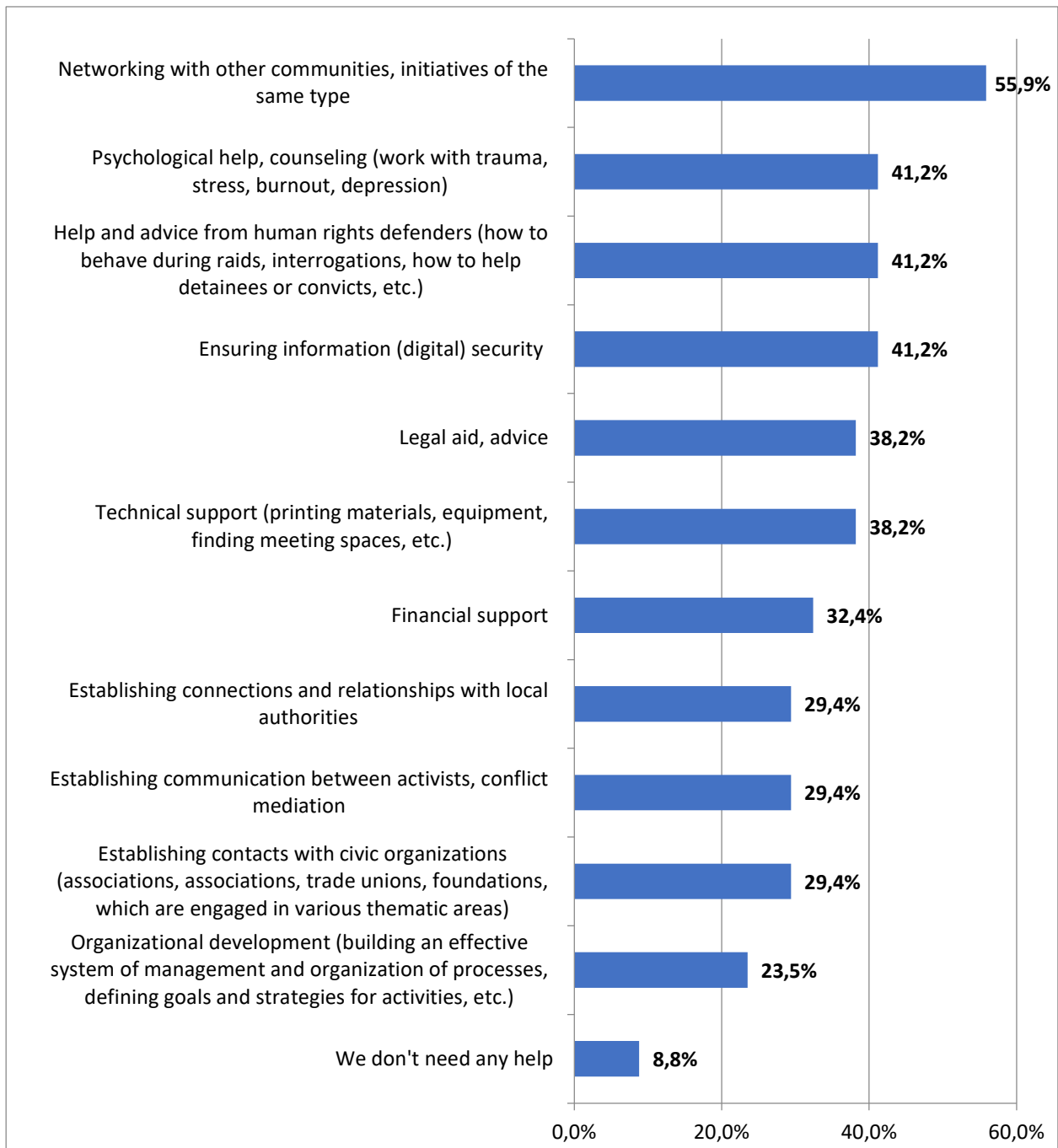
Figure 9. In-demand knowledge



Source: Responses to the questions "Do you personally feel you lack knowledge in the following areas?" and "What knowledge do you feel is most lacking in your community or initiative today?"

Most often, communities need assistance in networking with other communities (56%). The need for psychological support (41%) and assistance with security issues are also common: advice from human rights defenders (41%), information security (41%), and legal advice (38%) (Figure 10). The structure of assistance needs has changed significantly since 2021. The range of security requests has broadened: in 2021, it was mostly about information security. However, networking with other communities remains at the top of the list.

Figure 10. What kind of help does your community or initiative need?

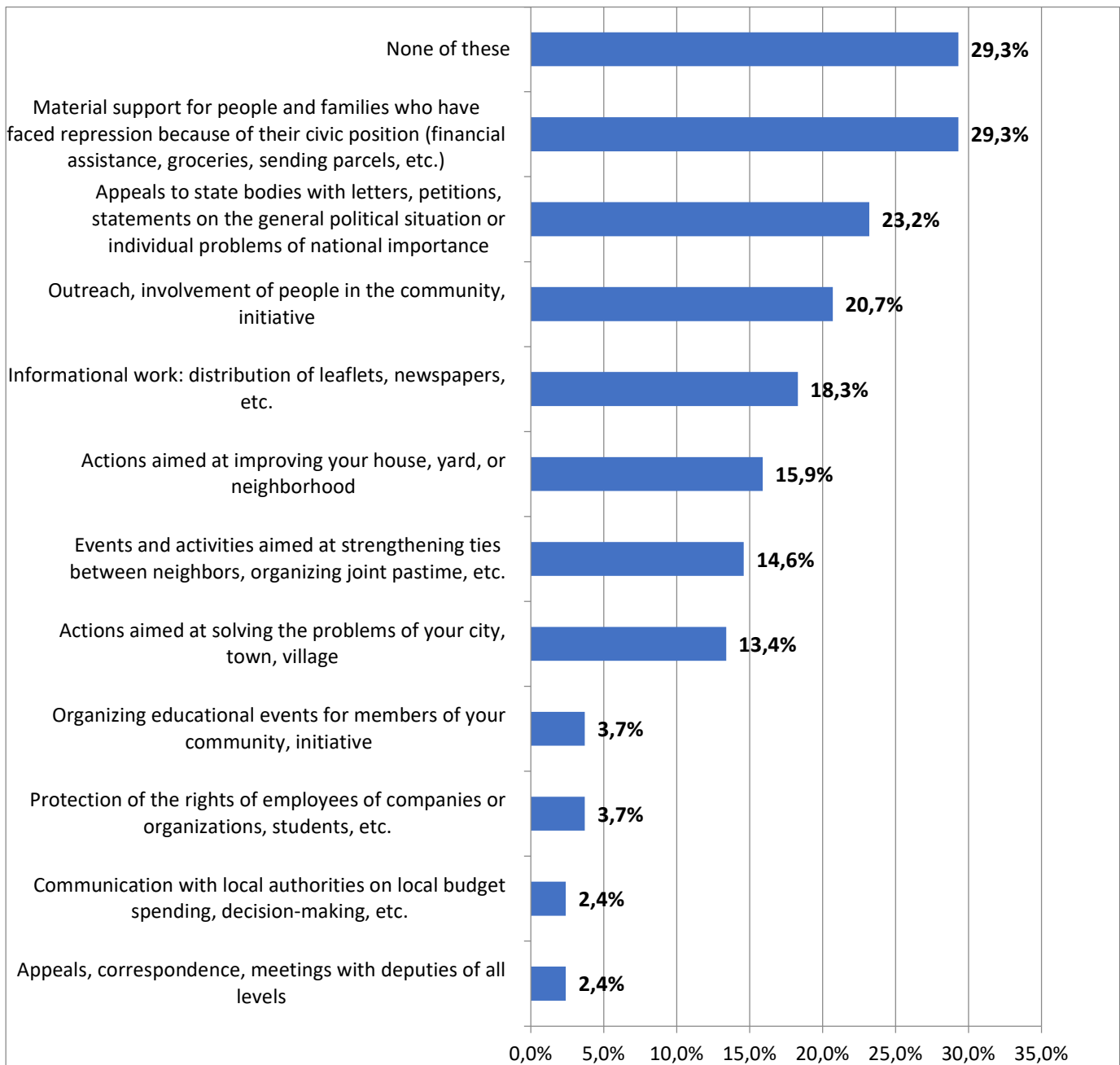


Thus, the main problem of grassroots communities is difficulties with establishing effective work in a repressive environment. Therefore, most of the popular needs are related to the safety of activists: knowledge and skills in information security, legal literacy, assistance of human rights defenders, legal and psychological counseling. The skills of working with target audiences and planning, establishing activist connections, knowledge of the Belarusian culture, and general knowledge about politics are also relevant.

3.3 Areas of activity, problems and needs of activists

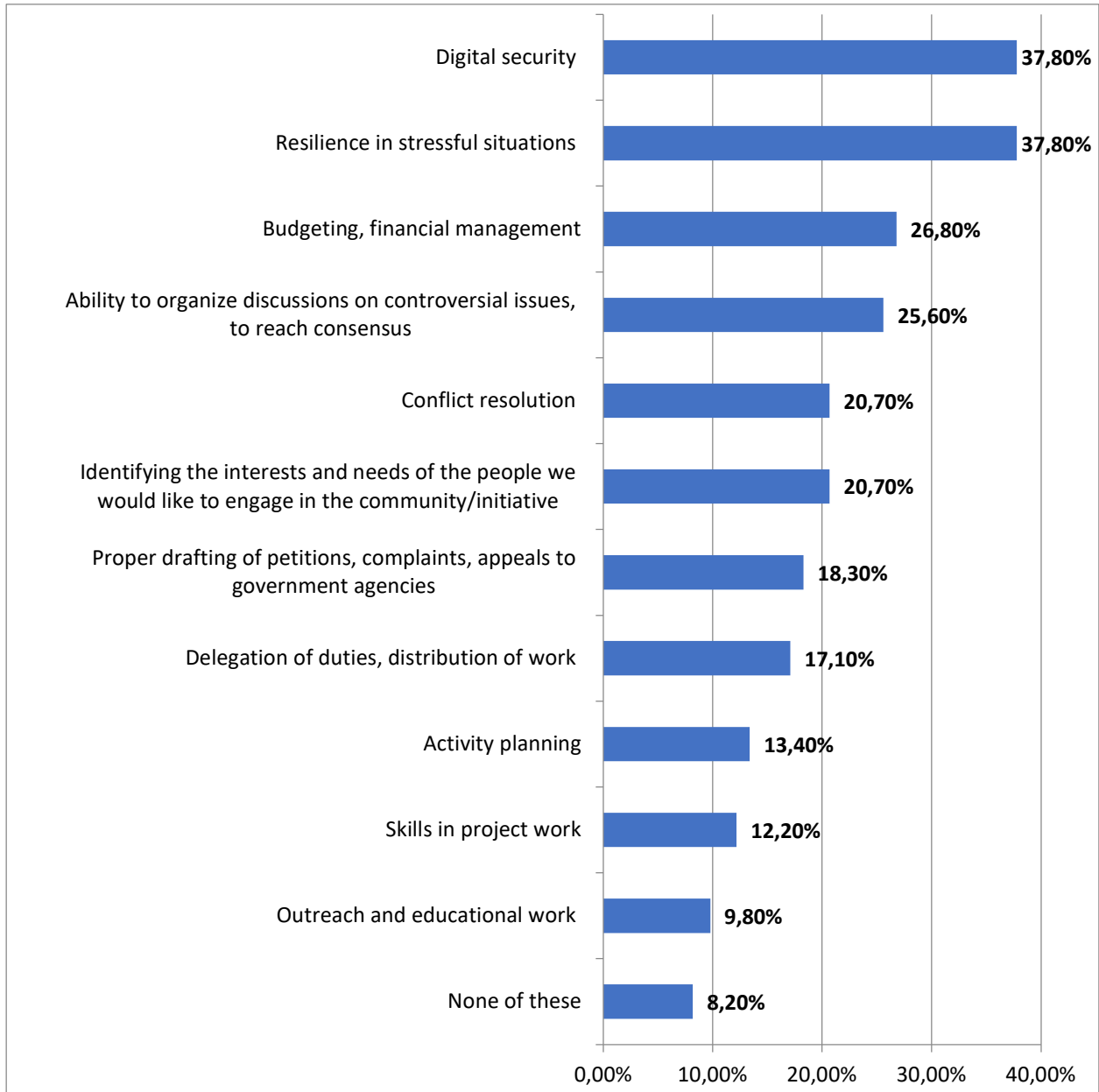
The most common forms of activity: material support of the repressed (29%), appeals to state agencies (23%), and educational work (21%). At the same time, almost a third of the respondents (29%) had not been involved in any activity in the last three months (Fig. 11). Speaking about plans for the near future, almost none of the respondents see opportunities for new forms of activity.

Figure 11. What initiatives or activities have you been involved in over the last three months?



Digital security skills (38%) and resilience in stressful situations (38%) are the two most frequent requests among activists. In addition to these, about a quarter mentioned budgeting and discussion organization skills (Figure 12).

Fig. 12. What practical knowledge/skills do you lack?



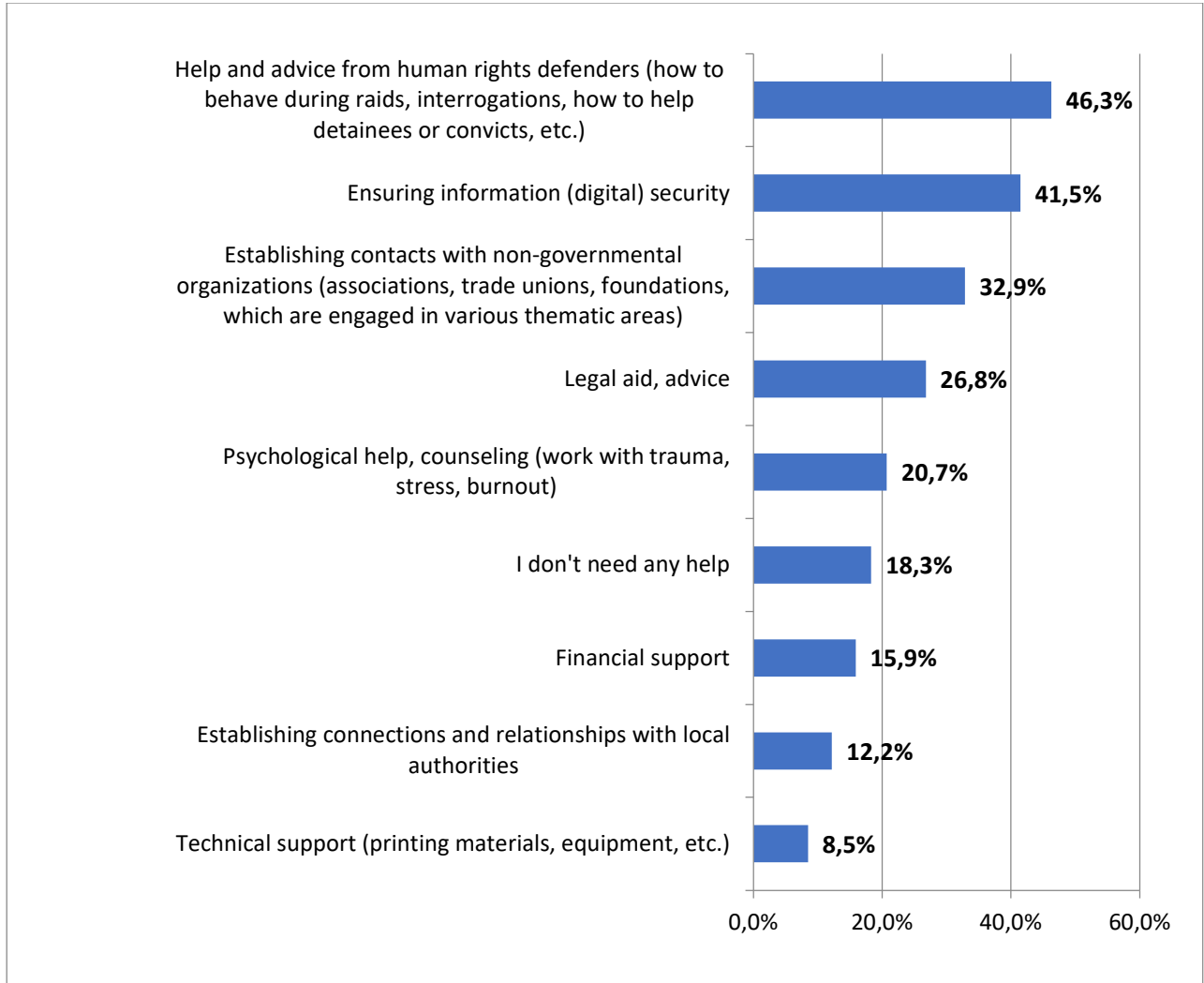
As with skills, the most in-demand knowledge is related to security: 77% note a lack of legal knowledge and 43% indicate a lack of security knowledge (Figure 13). Knowledge of the Belarusian culture (43%), international politics (40%), and economics (40%) are also common.

Figure 13. Do you personally feel a lack of knowledge in the following areas?



Security needs also come to the forefront when it comes to the question of required assistance: 46% noted the need for advice from human rights defenders, 41% mentioned the need for assistance in ensuring information security (Fig. 14), and 27% indicated the need for legal advice. A third of respondents (33%) also note the need to establish contacts with civic organizations.

Figure 14: What kind of help would you need to participate more effectively in various campaigns and initiatives aimed at changing the country?



Thus, both the activities and needs of activists are mainly related to resisting repression.

About a third of respondents are engaged in material support of the repressed, and another third have not been active recently. Among other activities, appeals to state bodies as well as educational and informational work are widespread. About one in five activists surveyed are engaged in these activities.

Most often the interviewed activists need knowledge and skills in the field of information security, psychological resilience in stressful situations, legal literacy, human rights defenders' advice is in demand. Activists are also interested in acquiring organizational skills.

Summarizing the results of the survey, we note that the activities, problems, and needs of grassroots communities and activists are mainly related to the repressive environment. At the same time, informational and educational work, interest in organizational competencies, cultural and political knowledge are quite widespread.

Community activists prevail among the active participants of associations. Most of these associations emerged after August 2020. Today, they are mainly engaged in material support of the repressed, educational and informational work, the strengthening of neighborhood relations, and their neighborhood improvement.

- The main problem of such communities is the difficulty of working effectively in a repressive environment.
- Consequently, the main needs are related to information security and legal literacy, assistance of human rights defenders, psychological and legal advice.
- There are also widespread needs for skills in working with target audiences, planning and building activist relationships, and knowledge of politics and the Belarusian culture. Help with finances and technical support is needed.

A similar situation is observed among those activists who are involved in community activities only from time to time. Most often they are engaged in assistance to the repressed, educational and outreach work.

- The main needs of activists are also related to the need to act in the face of repression: digital security and stress resilience, legal literacy, guidance from human rights defenders on how to behave in case of pressure, legal advice.
- Activists are also interested in organizational skills: budgeting, working with target audiences, establishing group dynamics, building relationships with civic organizations. There is also a significant interest in knowledge of politics and the Belarusian culture.

Thus, the focus of activists on security issues points to the main barrier to activity: state repression. At the same time, this focus on security issues, combined with a widespread interest in different forms of activism and competencies, means that some activists want to continue to adapt and act.

Compared to 2021, the list of the most common forms of activity remained unchanged, with the exception of the discontinued solidarity actions. The main problems and needs for competencies have not changed, although the demand for information skills has decreased and the lack of safe forms of activity has become more acute. So, over the past year, grassroots communities have continued to stagnate, with a slight decrease in activity and an increase in requests for security assistance.

CONCLUSIONS

In 2021-2022, many studies concerning the problems of civil society were conducted in Belarus. They focus on various aspects of its activity and differ both in their form and empirical filling. It is obvious that both Belarusian experts and representatives of the civil society themselves possess a large body of empirical information and know about the existing problems from their own experience. However, the research lacks conceptualization, a deeper generalization and elaboration of this material to a certain extent, which would help to better understand the processes taking place in Belarus. The study of successful practices of implementing goals or overcoming crisis situations could also be a productive area of future research.

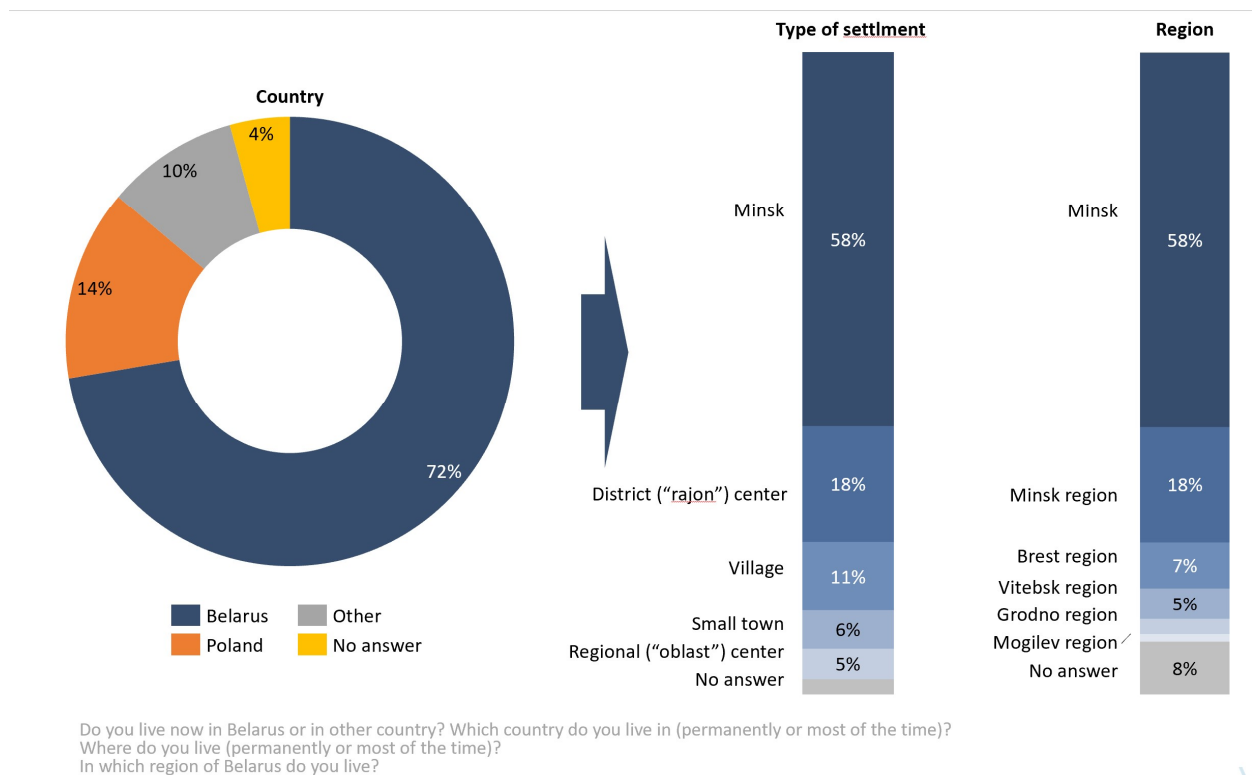
The state of the organized civil society can be called "the routinization of the crisis". The environment in which CSOs and local communities are forced to exist has become even more repressive. The needs of CSOs, as well as local communities and activists, in the analyzed period (first half of 2022) largely coincided with those described in the previous stages of the study: organizational and institutional support, flexible approach from donors, assistance with security, psychological support, and a variety of individual-level support. Civil society wants and does a lot to remain united, but distance exists and deepens between the organizations that have relocated abroad and those that remain in Belarus. The conditions of their existence and activity, risks, funding opportunities, and needs are extremely different. There is a clustering of CSOs by host countries. At the same time, as far as the agenda is concerned, almost all Belarusian civil society organizations remain focused on Belarus, but in some cases, their activity has to switch over to those who are outside the country. The last point testifies to the contradiction between the priorities of work and support of those who are in the country, declared both by the organizations themselves and by donors, and the real possibilities of the organizations. For all Belarusian activists, regardless of their location, the question of visa support both for themselves and for their families remains important at the individual level.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about activists and grassroots communities in Belarus since the survey conducted as part of the study is more of a case study. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that requests for support in the areas of security, community building, and acquiring new knowledge and skills in various areas remain among this group. The main challenge is to find forms of effective and safe activity in a highly repressive environment. Further research into the situation in grassroots communities could focus on exploring relevant ways to meet the needs of activists and communities, as well as identifying effective strategies for action in the current environment.

Appendix. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (grassroots communities and activists)

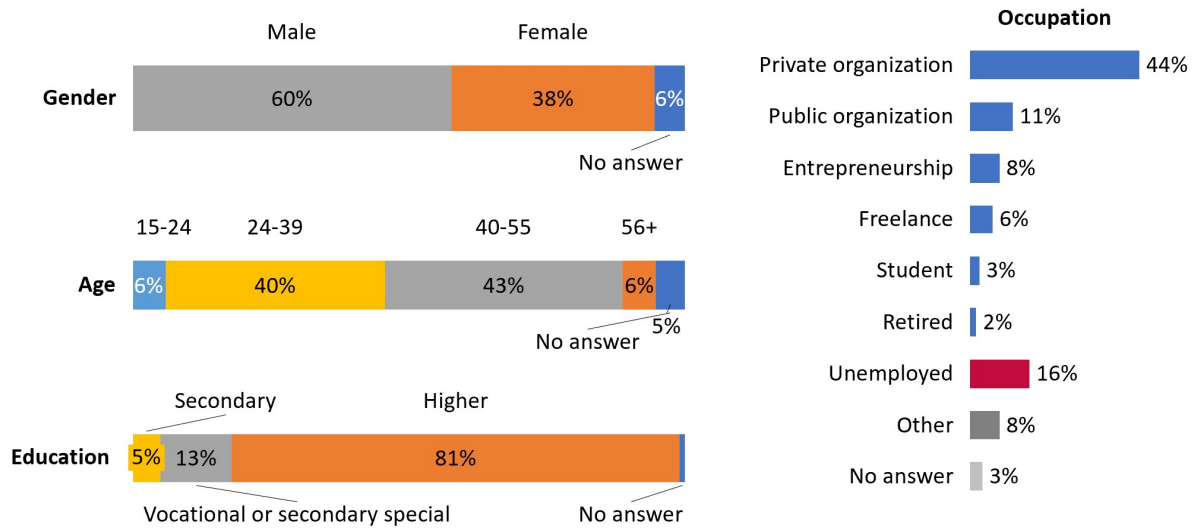
Most of the activists in the sample live in Belarus (72%), with Poland (14%) accounting for the largest number of activists in other countries. Those who live in Belarus are mostly residents of Minsk (58%), but a significant share is from small towns (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Place of residence



The sample is slightly more male (60%) than female (38%), mostly middle-aged: 24-39 years old (40%) and 40-55 years old (43%). The vast majority have higher education (81%), the largest proportion (44%) work in private companies (Figure 16).

Fig. 16. Main socio-demographic characteristics



Please indicate your gender.
How old are you?
What education do you have?
What is your type of occupation?