Is everything new well-forgotten old? Overview of the Belarusian civil society initiatives that emerged after 2020

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Belarus saw a mass protest mobilization of society, on a scale and in forms not seen in the country since the 1990s. Alongside the activization of citizens, new networks and initiatives uniting large groups of people on the most different grounds and in the most diverse variations (local, professional communities, associations of interests, etc.) emerged. These new initiatives arose as a response to the sharply increased interest of the Belarusian society in civic activity and the desire to act together to achieve socially significant goals. Although, in some cases, due to various circumstances, the newly emerged initiatives were created for the same purposes and tasks that the "old" civil society organizations (CSOs) had already performed for many years. After two and a half years (as of May 2023), and given the extremely repressive environment in Belarus, the development of the initiatives that emerged on the wave of protest mobilization took different trajectories: some of them took the shape of conventional forms of associations, foundations, etc.; some still exist in an unregistered state; some have ceased to exist for various reasons (ranging from repression to internal contradictions or a loss of interest in public activity).

In this research which continues to monitor the situation within the sphere of Belarusian civil society organizations[1], we look specifically at this kind of "new" initiatives and organizations which emerged or were formed in 2020 or later inside or outside of Belarus and which, in one form or another, have survived until today. All of these organizations focus their activities on the Belarusian agenda and/or work with Belarusians.

We intended to answer the following research questions related to these "new" organizations and initiatives:
- Are there and what are the main differences between civil society organizations/initiatives that existed in Belarus before and after 2020?
- Is there an interaction between the supposedly "old" and "new" initiatives and organizations? If so, what are the specifics?

Also, in this study we repeated the questions we had asked in our previous monitorings about an overall assessment of the sector, its problems and needs, and relationships with donor organizations. The particularity was that the answers to the questions represent the perspective of "new" organizations and initiatives. However, as we will see, their views may well be extrapolated to "old" organizations.

Seventeen (17) semi-structured interviews with representatives of Belarusian organizations/initiatives that emerged during the specified period were conducted for this research from February 1 to March 5, 2023. All interviews were conducted anonymously and confidentially, so we do not provide the names of organizations/initiatives. The sample was

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[1] Previous studies include a report "State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis" (2021), a study "State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis (Monitoring: July - December 2021)", and a study "State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis (Monitoring: January - July 2022)".

formed by the snowball method through personal contacts and recommendations of the interviewees. This circumstance probably imposed certain restrictions on the results of the study. Nevertheless, as it is impossible to determine the number of new organizations and initiatives and, accordingly, to form a representative quantitative sample, this research can claim to reflect certain tendencies inherent in the Belarusian organizations/initiatives which emerged after 2020. When preparing this report, we also used the experience and knowledge gained during our own participant observation based on work in the sector.

The sample of this study, apart from one case, did not include the so-called diaspora organizations, whose target audience is exclusively Belarusians who have left the country. All our other interviewees work with target audiences both inside and outside the country. And even that one diaspora organization in the sample has connections and certain activities directly with the audience inside Belarus. We managed to cover quite a wide range of organizations in their areas and spheres of activity. Among them are the following:
- "classical" human rights organizations,
- innovative citizen mobilization initiatives,
- organizations dealing with research and data collection,
- organizations that unite and represent certain professional groups,
- organizations that provide services of various kinds (legal, psychological, etc.).

It can also be noted that due to the personal background of the authors of the study, who themselves are included in the activities of civil society from the perspective of "old" organizations, the design of the sample posed a certain problem. First, apart from the organizations and initiatives that emerged in 2020 and later, which were known either by virtue of their mass, publicity, or personal networking, the rest were a kind of research discovery for the authors. It is also important to note the very limited number of expert or other research materials on this topic. Therefore, this study presents a certain innovation in terms of working with the insufficiently studied sphere of Belarusian civil society.

1. CLASSIFICATION OF THE BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: A PERSPECTIVE AFTER 2020. "NEW" AND "OLD" CSOS

One of the most obvious classification criteria of Belarusian civil society in the context of the 2020 events and the subsequent political crisis is the period of emergence of organizations/initiatives. This criterion, along with the thematic one (depending on the activities of organizations), is used by both experts and representatives of civil society themselves. Accordingly, it is customary to distinguish between human rights, social, environmental, and other organizations.

However, if we look at organizations and initiatives from a different perspective, we can also use such criteria as their human resources and structure to classify them. Then the organizations/initiatives that emerged after 2020 can be conditionally divided into two groups/categories:

1. **"Fundamentally new"** organizations and initiatives that emerged in 2020 or later and that included people with no experience in the third sector. In a number of cases, these are people who until then had had no active civic and/or political position at all and knew little about this sphere at all. One example here would be such an initiative as Honest People.[2]
2. **"New-old"** organizations and initiatives that emerged or formed after 2020. However, they included activists who had previously had experience of civic or political participation (often along with "newcomers"). Some of them were professional third sector workers. For example, the Belarus Solidarity Foundation (BYSOL).

In the context of ongoing repressions, it is very likely that the second group of organizations, whose activists had already gained profound experience in both public activity and existence in a hostile environment, showed more stability, did not disappear, and continue their activities. In the first group ("fundamentally new"), the trajectories of initiatives or organizations are more diverse: some of them have disappeared, while some, on the contrary, are becoming more professionalized and are acquiring the features of "old" civil society organizations (CSOs). However, the difference in self-preservation and development between the two types of organizations and initiatives may not be so significant. And, if they have survived to the present (spring 2023), they are all characterized by an evolutionary development toward institutionalization. The latter occurs predominantly abroad.

Organizationally, there are cases where new initiatives, which either focus on narrower target groups or on specific activities, were singled out within new initiatives/organizations. Also, there is a new initiative in our sample that emerged and partly operates independently but has organizationally attached itself to an "old" organization that handles its management and accounting.

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[2] These examples are for illustrative purposes only.

At the same time, interestingly, in the group of organizations/initiatives of both types, there are still those that have not been legally formalized and continue to exist in the form of small initiatives. However, the interviewees in this subgroup spoke of plans to formalize their initiatives into more sustainable forms in the future. They attributed the lack of institutionalization to a lack of resources (human, time, financial, etc.).

Most interviewees believe that the criterion of the geographical location of organizations/initiatives is not considered to be fundamentally important to distinguish between "new" and "old" organizations. As for new organizations/initiatives, it is possible to argue that all of them exist in one of the three geographical modalities: 1) completely in Belarus; 2) completely abroad; and 3) in a mixed format, when part of the organization and its employees and activists are inside, and part outside of Belarus.

There are also differences in the needs and status of organizations depending on the country of their relocation (Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, other countries), as described in previous issues of the monitoring. We would like to mention as an interesting point the opinion of one of our respondents from Georgia, who described the attitude of Polish and Lithuanian CSOs towards their initiative as "periphery" and being looked at from the "center".

The public nature of activity can be defined as another criterion of classification of civil society organizations/initiatives. Depending on the purposes, target groups, and format of activity, there are quite open, publicly known initiatives, with their own websites and social networks, the names of which are known at least to the audience interested in the events in Belarus. And, on the contrary, there are those which by virtue of the peculiarities of their activity remain outside of publicity.

The degree of radicality of actions was also suggested as a criterion by one of the interviewees. As an extreme case, initiatives/organizations are virtually unknown because they engage in active resistance and civil disobedience, which may not have a peaceful, non-violent nature (e.g., direct action guerrilla initiatives, which are usually not public).

In discussing the main differences between the new and old organizations, the interviewees named:
1. Differences in management, organizational culture, and management practices. New organizations are more likely to have business models and their corresponding management and teamwork practices. The latter seems natural, since these organizations have people who come from the business community, IT, law firms, etc. Not surprisingly, they bring with them relevant planning, management, evaluation, and results-oriented practices. In several interviews, our interlocutors also spoke of virtually nonstop, round-the-clock work during peak moments of events in 2020. Although this pace of activity has subsequently changed, the work of "fundamentally new" organizations continues, overall, to be carried out in a "cult of productivity" beat. While in another interview, by contrast, it was said that because the new organizations often

got, so to speak, "random" people in the wave of mobilization, this, on the contrary, now leads to poor management of these organizations.

2. To continue the topic of differences in management, interviewees reported that new organizations have more horizontal structures, transparency, and a drive for it. In particular, representatives of some organizations in the "new-old" category indicated that such horizontal, people-oriented approaches to personnel policy were fundamentally important to them, as a kind of opposition to the more hierarchical structure that existed in the organizations where they worked previously. More attention is paid to the microclimate of relationships, team building, and the need for psychological support for employees/staff in these organizations by management. This may also be due to a heavy workload in 2020 and a period after that, when activists and employees worked non-stop, not caring too much about their physical and mental condition. As a result, some people in the "new" initiatives simply burned out, so now the factor of psychological well-being is seen as particularly important. Although it was noted that the attitude towards employees and the awareness of the need for their support (especially psychological) is also changing in the old organizations.

3. It is likely that there are other perceptions/expectations of pay levels in the sector in new organizations. For example, our interviewees talked about the fact that professionals who came from business began to advocate for increased levels of pay in the sector, bringing it closer to more familiar standards. While older organizations also faced the need to increase pay costs, in this case it was the result of rising costs of living and changing tax deductions in the countries of relocation, etc., rather than higher expectations of management and employees of CSOs.

4. Former civil servants and even former representatives of law enforcement agencies joined new organizations or even became their founders.

5. Legal registration of new organizations takes place outside of Belarus. In contrast, the old structures more often used to have, or even still have, legal entities in Belarus. As noted earlier, some of the new organizations still exist in a non-institutionalized form but have plans to register.

6. It was noted that the new organizations and initiatives work for a more diverse and less specialized audience than the organizations that operated before 2020. Accordingly, it is possible to say that at the time of their emergence, the new organizations had, and in some cases continue to have, a focus on broader target groups (representatives of different social strata, professional groups, etc.). One interview suggested that for their initiative, getting the message out to a broader audience was a higher priority than engaging or activating a few people. In contrast, the "old" organizations/initiatives were more specialized and focused on narrower social groups.

In some cases, the activities of new organizations are still aimed at civil or even political mobilization (in one way or another), i.e., we can talk about their conditional "politicization" or a greater degree of political involvement, or engagement. However, our interviewees from these organizations also noted that the nature of their activities had changed. Whereas previously they focused predominantly on protest mobilization, now, when it is virtually impossible due to repression, organizations/initiatives have switched to activities that are connected with longer-term effects and expectations. These include information campaigns, civic education, etc.

7. In the case of small "new-new" organizations, we can talk about their lower embeddedness, inclusion, and interaction both with the donor community and with other organizations/initiatives of the sector. Accordingly, they have more limited opportunities to receive donor support since they are not known.

8. Some interviewees pointed to more idealism and less pragmatism in the activities of new organizations, where, having emerged in a wave of strong civic upheaval, they still retain a "be realistic, demand the impossible!" modality. They do not pragmatize their activities based on notions of preferential donor support. For example, they do not apply for projects that do not match their interests. In contrast, on the part of some "old-new" organizations, whose representatives have been in the sector for a long time, there were statements that they knew exactly how to apply for a project and then report back on the results, which was presented in interviews as a competitive advantage.

It is important to note that over time, the difference between new and old organizations and initiatives can and will de facto level out. Nowadays, we observe several similar characteristics of "old" and "new" organizations. For example, project funding now prevails in almost all Belarusian civil society organizations/initiatives regardless of the time of their emergence because opportunities of any other kind of funding (for example, crowdfunding) are limited or do not exist at all. It also results in similar management approaches. It is also clear that all organizations lack connections and interaction with business, which, with a few exceptions in 2020, have never been fully developed.

2. SECTORAL AND INTERSECTORAL COLLABORATION

When it comes to the **intersectoral dimension**, the **interaction between new and old organizations** is assessed differently by our interviewees. In the case of "new-new" organizations, it was often said that in the beginning, immediately after their emergence, there was no cooperation with the "old" organizations at all. Or if it did happen, it was cautious, distrustful, or even arrogant toward each other. For example, old organizations and activists considered new colleagues in the sector to be "upstarts", while the new ones, in turn, pointed out to the old ones that they allegedly did not know how to work and had not been able to achieve much during their many years of existence. Sometimes there were perceptions that the new organizations would be able to set an example of an effective and successful work. However, in our interviews such judgments and assessments from the new initiatives, with a few exceptions (when there was still a lack of recognition of the experience and practices of the old organizations, a belief in the superiority of their knowledge) were no longer heard. On the contrary, in some cases there were emotional statements made by representatives of the new players in the sector, regretting that they knew so little about the "old third sector" and had previously allowed themselves a not entirely correct attitude toward people there. In one interview, our interlocutor, when asked about previously existing organizations in the sector, tried to remember as many old CSOs as possible, worrying that he could not name them all.

Nevertheless, there are still some difficulties between "old-timers" and "newcomers" in intersectoral collaboration. For example, interviewees from "fundamentally new" organizations pointed to the continued dismissive or disrespectful attitude or communication from those who have been working in the sector for a long time (in particular, from representatives of "old" human rights organizations). However, it is not clear to what extent these instances are of a systemic nature, conditioned by the (new) position of the organization/initiative in the sector, or they are related to personal characteristics of activists.

In the case of "new-old" organizations, the situation looks somewhat different. The connections with the old civil society in this case are organic, because people have already worked and are known there. Activists who work in such organizations got into them following different trajectories. Some consciously and purposefully left old organizations to create/join new ones that were seen as more functional and/or better corresponding to their values. Some found themselves in the new organizations out of necessity when they moved from Belarus to other countries or because their organizations/initiatives ceased to exist.

In one interview it was argued that the degree of interaction between "new" and "old" organizations can also depend on the sector in which the organizations operate. For example, in the more consolidated and stable parts of the sector where there are "old" leaders with good reputations (e.g., in the human rights sector) interaction will be more effective than in sectors where this was not the case.

It also seems important to mention another opinion that "old" and "new" organizations obviously have something to share with each other, as evidenced by existing cases and examples

of cooperation. Therefore, strengthening collaboration would obviously contribute to the sustainability of the entire sector. However, it was also noted that when donors insisted on interaction or uniting in some kind of consortia within civil society, such unions might be quite formal, although they could also be useful. According to one interviewee, as a result of such "forced" unions, activists sometimes begin to understand the value of voluntary cooperation on their own, without external pressure.

It is also worth noting that physical spaces have been opened in various countries for working together and organizing events – co-working spaces, hubs, centers. These spaces also help to consolidate CSOs, at least within that country/city.

2.1   Interaction with politicians

Speaking of interaction with political actors, we are referring primarily to independent political actors working abroad (Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office, the Coordination Council, the United Transitional Cabinet, the National Anti-Crisis Management, etc.). Both the attitude towards them and the degree of interaction with them by CSOs can be completely different. This is often due to personal attitudes toward certain politicians or political organizations. In some cases, there were direct links to political actors, as initiatives emerged as part of their election campaigns. In addition, interviewees mentioned cases when organizations provided outsourced services to political structures (for example, consultations or assistance with preparing position papers on certain issues).

In one interview, an interesting assessment was made that there is not much difference between new CSOs and new (emerged in 2020 and later) political organizations. Sometimes CSOs perform functions similar to political ones, such as promoting certain issues and topics on the agenda of foreign politicians or international organizations. Information and advocacy campaigns, jointly conducted by new civil society organizations/initiatives and political ones, were also mentioned.

Interestingly, in one of the interviews we were told about interaction with local authorities and government agencies inside Belarus, which still provide venues for events of this CSO. However, there are very few venues of this kind. And it was the only interview in our sample that mentioned such interaction. In addition, according to another interviewee, the situation in which more people from the state apparatus became involved in civil society contributed to a better understanding of the work of the latter due to the availability of insider information. However, this circumstance is now probably losing its importance due to the "cleansing" taking place in the public agencies and governmental institutions in Belarus.

2.2   Interaction with the media

Interaction with the media often exists in new organizations, but its forms and types differ depending on the type of publicity that an organization/initiative has chosen. For example, when an organization provides services to people who come from Belarus for a short period of

time, it usually prefers not to spread information about it publicly or in media. Meanwhile according to the interviews, new organizations/initiatives now have a better understanding of how the independent media sphere functions. It was also mentioned that the media presence of Belarusian CSOs in general is limited (and often cannot be relied upon to reach target groups) due to the blocking of independent media in Belarus, assigning them an extremist status, and other barriers.

2.3   Interaction with business

Among all sectors, Belarusian business is obviously the least connected and the least engaged with Belarusian civil society, although in some cases business associations claim or receive donor support as part of general support for civil society.

At the same time, it is important to note that at the time of their emergence and during the peak events of 2020, some new organizations/initiatives received substantial support from Belarusian business in the form of donations or other types of assistance. At present, such support is hardly mentioned.

We might assume that programs of social responsibility of big Belarusian business companies after their relocation from Belarus either have not yet been restored or are not tailored for interaction with the Belarusian civil society organizations and initiatives. However, this aspect requires further study and analysis and is beyond the scope of this study.

There were statements of the interviewees that they would potentially like to establish cooperation with Belarusian business. Some of them have more advanced ideas and elaborations in this area. However, except for separate cases of supporting projects, organizations, or initiatives on the part of business, we cannot currently speak about more systematic interaction.

3. ASSESSMENT OF STATE, ASPECTS OF PLANNING, AND WORK WITH TARGET GROUPS. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE IMPACT OF WAR

Assessment of state of civil society. In previous studies, we used such characteristics as "crisis" and "survival" describing the state of Belarusian civil society organizations. At the same time, we noted that CSOs "get used to" this state, especially if they are located abroad.[3] In this study, our interviewees were less inclined to agree that their organizations were in a state of crisis, but more inclined to say that crisis was a kind of environment of their overall existence and vitality, a "new normality." This crisis is more psychological, affecting the overall motivation for activity, rather than a manifestation of an organization's state.

During the interviews, we heard various assessments of the situation with access to the target groups. For organizations/initiatives that provide services (legal, psychological, etc.), access to their target audiences has not deteriorated. The situation is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, as is evident from the results of previous studies, the demand of Belarusian activists, organizations, and initiatives for consulting, legal, psychological, and other help not only to target groups, but also to themselves, is obviously high. On the other hand, initiatives providing such services cannot afford much publicity for security reasons, so their target groups often do not even know about them. The authors of this study were not able to get in touch with such initiatives right away; it took additional research efforts to find out about them and talk to their representatives. At the same time, statements about target groups' growth were heard not only in the case of service organizations/initiatives, but also from those who, for example, work in the sphere of culture. Moreover, according to the interviewees, the target groups' growth occurs thanks to people inside Belarus.

However, in several cases, interviewees spoke of problems with access to target audiences and deteriorating conditions not only for attracting new people, but also for maintaining access to those who were already in the orbit of the organizations' activities. As an ultimate pessimistic view, one interviewee noted that "we lost the information war", i.e., were not successful in attracting new audiences and in maintaining an agenda for the "old" audiences. Others were less pessimistic, but also pointed to difficulties in this area. For example, in some cases (among student organizations/initiatives), a target group itself changes its composition: those who launched the student movement in 2020 ended up abroad or in prisons, and some students simply completed their studies. As a result, organizations/initiatives are trying to gain the trust of new students, many of whom do not have a collective memory of the events that took place almost three years ago. Other interviewees indicated that not only did the organizations/initiatives lose access to target groups, but they themselves were more in a self-preservation mode, i.e., they were not active, but were trying to preserve their own initiatives for possible future actions.

According to some interviewees, over the past year, their organizations have managed to improve their **organizational capability**, set up internal work processes, develop policies, and

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[3] See previous studies of civil society https://sympa-by.eu/en/bipart/research

so on. However, sustainability problems remain due to the project nature of the support received when organizations feel confident about their funding only for an immediate project cycle.

Planning of activities remains difficult. It is understandable that it is more limited for unregistered initiatives. However, when new organizations are institutionalized, some form of planning does take place. In the case of organizations with well-established internal processes, this planning can be for a half-year, a year, or longer, while in parallel adapting to changing circumstances as necessary.

The war in Ukraine has a great influence on the organized civil society of Belarus as an extremely precipitating, one might say existential, factor strongly influencing the people involved in civil activism. As in the previous issue of monitoring, representatives of organizations and initiatives mentioned that the war redirected the activities of entire organizations in February 2022. Either staff/employees had to be physically removed from Ukraine, or there was a switch to volunteer work or refocusing of activities on the Ukrainian agenda. Over time, however, most organizations have returned to their agenda and continue either to work mainly for Belarus or (if they have the resources and their own willingness) continue, along with their core activities, to implement projects aimed at helping Ukraine.

An important structural change is the emergence in the activities of the organizations we surveyed of campaigns aimed at anti-war mobilization (in any form), counter-propaganda, and promotion of the national Belarusian culture, identity, ideas of sovereignty, and everything that makes it possible to resist Russian military aggression. In several interviews, it was stated that the war actualized national values in Belarusian society and public organizations/initiatives.

It was also mentioned that in the case of projects connected with Ukraine, there were initiatives aimed at showing Ukrainians the difference between the government in Belarus and its people who do not support the war. However, in some cases, such initiatives encountered a negative reaction from Ukrainians.

Some interviewees (just as in the previous study) voiced fears that donor support in the future will shift exclusively to Ukraine.

4. PROBLEMS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES

The interviewees named many problems that can be conditionally divided into those related to the external environment (target groups, donors, security, the environment of relocation countries, etc.) and those related to the internal state of organizations (management, human resources, finances, etc.). The first group of problems (**external** ones) includes:

1. The general state of frustration of Belarusian society, which also affects the third sector. It especially concerns people living in Belarus. Representatives of organizations observe an increased apathy, a decrease in interest in civic activities, atomization, and other survival strategies that do not involve civic activism. As one respondent put it, even 10% of the activism that we had in 2020 cannot be done today – there simply are not enough potential participants.

2. Security. Ongoing repression means that security remains the number one concern and need. For people inside Belarus, being active in any civil society organization/initiative entails extremely high risks. Organizations/initiatives have only a small number of measures they can take to ensure security, but even these measures do not provide guarantees due to the overwhelming volume of repression. There is also a question of how to engage new people from a security perspective. Organizations and donors face high security risks when thinking of ways to fund projects inside Belarus.

3. A set of problems related to legal and Internet restrictions. Recognition by the Belarusian authorities of organizations and initiatives as extremist entails limiting their audience, as does the blocking of their websites inside the country. As a result, people are either afraid to seek and receive information, or cannot find such information by a simple search. For example, due to the blocking of independent media websites, even if they contain some information about the activities of organizations/initiatives, it will not be found in search engines (Google, etc.). Accordingly, this circumstance seriously limits the impact on the target audience of civil society. It is important that some of our interviewees see a big problem and risk for their activities in case they and/or their organizations are recognized or may be recognized as extremist formations.

4. This set of problems also includes interaction, or rather lack of interaction and willingness to communicate on the part of BigTech companies (Meta, Google, etc.), which do not seek to accommodate the requests of Belarusian organizations in the field of security of Belarusian users.

5. Sanction restrictions in relation to Belarusians lead to a number of problems of personal and organizational nature. For example, there are difficulties in opening and administering organizations by Belarusians, opening bank accounts (at least in Georgia),

and purchasing licensed software. We documented problems of this kind in our previous monitoring[4].

6. Donor policies are in some cases described by interviewers as non-inclusive; sometimes organizations find it problematic to "fit in" with donors' agendas. In some cases, donors are seen by interviewees as imposing their views on issues such as salaries for Belarusian employees or how their needs are articulated. As an example, a networked service organization, where experts do not know each other, tries to find support for individual psychotherapy for employees, but donors agree to support only group counseling, believing that the effectiveness of individual counseling is too difficult to assess. Performance indicators may also be unrealistic, for example, in the case of psychological support. Reporting requirements may not be appropriate, especially from a security point of view (amount of documentation, requirements of personal data of participants, etc.).

7. Overall, civil society's need for funding far exceeds existing granting opportunities. The amount of grants, which allowed organizing activities in Belarus and paying competitive salaries, is insufficient in the case of relocated CSOs. Besides, the amount of funding does not make it possible to implement large-scale projects related to advocating for the interests of the country or individual target groups at the international level.

8. The nature of donor organizations' bureaucracy often results in gaps in project funding. Given that no other funding options are currently available to organizations, this means a difficult situation in each of these cases. It is symptomatic that even well-known organizations led by well-known activists and recognized as significant by all stakeholders reported such funding gaps.

9. The attention of donors is generally focused on Russia and Ukraine. Belarus either remains outside of the agenda, and the preservation of funding at the same level as in previous years, not comparable even with other countries of the Eastern Partnership, is considered to be a success. Or donors try to "insert" the Belarusian agenda into the agenda and programs connected with Russia or Ukraine.

Speaking of problems that can rather be attributed to **internal** problems of organizations, the following were mentioned:

1. Problems with staff are acute. "Old" activists are leaving, and new people are not coming, so there is no normal employee turnover in the sector. Organizations experience difficulties with recruiting professional staff. Here we can note the difficulties in adapting teams of organizations/initiatives when their members are located in different countries. There are also problems with dismissing existing employees, even if they are

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[4] A study "State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Situation of Political Crisis (Monitoring: January – July 2022)".

unable to cope with their duties and recruiting new ones as well as integrating them into the team. Activists themselves, especially "newcomers", often lack sufficient knowledge, for example about politics and human rights.

2. The psychological state of people in the sector relates to the personnel problems, but it is particularly acute, so we will mention it separately. Frustration, depression, stress, and burnout occur due to various reasons, but the result is a massive unsatisfactory psychological state of people in the Belarusian CSOs. Organizations take some measures, but these kinds of problems are not solved quickly and inexpensively. Sometimes there is reluctance, sometimes there is a lack of opportunity to work individually with psychologists. In some cases, individual psychological support is replaced by retreats and group meetings. Frustration also occurs due to postponed results from one's own activity. Often working for Belarusian CSOs does not bring fast, clearly visible results and a part of activities remains non-public due to security reasons. As a result, activists lose faith and a vision of the social value and importance of their activities. Because of this complex psychological and social condition within organizations and initiatives themselves, in some cases, there are simply not enough emotional resources for their own mobilization and implementation of some socially significant ideas. The positive thing is that this problem is "visible" to the heads of organizations, is not concealed, and that various attempts are made to address this issue.

3. A separate problem is the lack of top managers in organizations. The financial management problem described above is largely determined by external factors, but the presence of competent financial management would at least partially mitigate these risks. Likewise, the problem with human resources would probably be less acute with a strategic approach to human resource management. However, the Belarusian third sector now is not attractive for potential top managers either in terms of (un)security or in terms of pay levels. There are also no systematic attempts to change this situation.

4. Communication within the sector is sometimes problematic, but such cases were rarely mentioned in our interviews. They concerned cases of criticism of people inside and outside Belarus towards each other, of people in different countries, of "old" and "new" organizations. Rather, the gap between these different segments of civil society which used to live in one country can become a problem.

5. NECESSARY SUPPORT

Interviewees talked about the different needs of organizations that require funding. However, perhaps even more important are the requests for the nature of this support: the need for flexibility, the ability to modify projected results, the inclusive nature of support programs, and providing funding in a timely manner (there were cases of delayed funding of already approved projects by several months in 2022, resulting in organizations having difficulty paying their staff and carrying out their activities).

Representatives of organizations mentioned (as they did before) that institutional rather than project-based support is preferable, that various kinds of consultations (legal, organizational development, psychological support) are necessary, that meetings of distributed teams should be supported.

Training in project management, writing project proposals, fundraising, and preparing financial reports is in demand. Perhaps this should be done with a focus on specific areas (e.g., culture).

There is a request (again, not entirely new) for easier project reporting, especially for small grants. There is a lack of flexible grants for emergency support (where emergency includes a gap between projects, bridge funding).

6. RELATIONSHIPS WITH DONORS AND EVALUATION OF EXISTING SUPPORT PROGRAMS

The tonality of opinions on relationships with donors predictably differs depending on the experience gained by the organizations and the situation with their support at the time of the interview. Thus, the greatest criticism in this regard was voiced by those who are not currently receiving support or are still waiting to receive feedback on their applications. One of the problematic aspects that interviewees mentioned was that donor organizations sometimes put forward requirements in their programs which cannot be implemented in Belarus in the current conditions. For example, registration of the project with the Department for Humanitarian Activities[5] of the Administration of the President of Belarus. Another example was a case in which a donor suggested that representatives of an organization that had been evacuated from Ukraine after the start of the war should return there to collect the documents that they could not take with them.

Another problem mentioned was the imbalance and inequality in communication with donors, when Belarusian applicants are required to respond quickly, while representatives of donor organizations themselves do not always answer questions, confirm receipt of documents, or perform other obvious and uncomplicated acts of business communication.

Without claiming to be innovative, we can say that the relationship of new organizations/initiatives with donors depends largely on the reputation of the former, their stable connections with donor organizations, as well as personal relationships with representatives of donors. It is also possible to talk about donors' work primarily with one pool of organizations known to them.

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[5] Website of the Department for Humanitarian Activities of the Administration of the President of Belarus https://dha.gov.by/en/

CONCLUSIONS

The Belarusian civil society organizations which emerged in 2020 and later can be classified based on their founders' experience of public activity. In this research, we conditionally distinguished two types: "fundamentally new", without experience of civic participation and corresponding institutional memory, and "new-old", which involve people with experience of work in the third sector. These two types differ somewhat in terms of the implementation of their activities, their potential for sustainability, and their interaction both within the sector and with donors.

There is a difference between "new" and "old" organizations of the Belarusian civil society, although in many cases it diminishes over time. This especially concerns funding and functioning in a project-based format. At the same time, the most basic distinctive feature of the "new" organizations concerns their target audience. Unlike "old" CSOs, a number of new Belarusian organizations of both types work for the general public rather than specialized target groups. Compared to the period of their emergence, activities of the new organizations are now often not so much focused on mobilization, as it is more about education, information, counter-narratives, and other long-term goals. There are still differences in the management of organizations that are likely to persist. Especially if they were founded and staffed by people who came from business and who have strong managerial skills. At the same time, if organizations were founded by "newcomers" with no management experience, their trajectory can transform over time and become more and more similar to the management of "old" Belarusian CSOs. Moreover, if such a transformation does not occur, they can completely disappear.

Echoing the opinion of one of our interviewees, it is possible to say that the "new" organizations "have hardened", "have taken their own lump", have received their portion of "bitter experience," and now evaluate themselves and their resources more realistically. It is a usual way of organizational development; however, the peculiarity of "new" Belarusian organizations/initiatives was the fact that they had to go through it under the most unfavorable conditions of aggravating repression at first, and then the war.

We can say that, in some cases, the relationship between the "new" and "old" organizations of the sector is also changing. There are fewer conflicts and more interactions, connections, and partnerships. However, opinions on intersectoral relationships differed in our study.

Problems and needs of "new" Belarusian organizations are similar to those of "old" organizations, therefore this aspect can be analyzed for all organizations together, irrespective of the time of their creation and staffing. These problems and needs still concern the issues of security, stable funding, legal restrictions, organizational development, etc. A separate challenge for the Belarusian civil society is the human resources issue, and we believe it is becoming more acute than before, and its importance will probably be increasing. The problem of digital authoritarianism on the part of the Belarusian state, which creates obstacles to the dissemination of information thus creating additional problems for civil society, also attracts

more attention. Speaking about the specific problems and needs of new organizations, we can separately highlight only a few, including the need to gain experience of interaction with donors as well as with the rest of the sector.

Overall, the state of new civil society organizations is similar to the state of old ones and is determined both by external factors (peculiarities of the countries of relocation, repression in Belarus, sanction restrictions against Belarusians, etc.) and internal ones (human resources issues, reduced interest of the Belarusian society in activism because of repressions, etc.)

Within the framework of this study, there were many discussions about the difficult psychological and crisis (because of repressions and unclear perspectives) condition of the Belarusian society itself, people inside and outside of Belarus, and, accordingly, in the third sector. Some respondents gave more optimistic opinions, while others were more pessimistic. At the same time, it is important that the Belarusian authorities' strategy of labeling "extremists" seriously affects the entire civil society. We can see that those organizations and initiatives that have not received such a status operate with more confidence and have fewer problems both in accessing target audiences and in implementing their activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the donor community

- To consider providing institutional funding for Belarusian civil society organizations/initiatives. Although project-based funding is the dominant global practice of supporting CSOs, the specifics of the Belarusian civil society, which faces extremely high levels of repression and difficulties working from abroad, allow for such a recommendation. Perhaps such funding can only be allocated for short periods of time and as a form of urgent assistance. For example, during the periods when organizations are between projects, or are waiting for approval of their project applications for new funding. This approach would allow organizations to avoid losing staff and experiencing organizational stress due to the inability to implement their activities.
- To consider and, if possible, address requests from Belarusian civil society organizations and initiatives to change the approach of donor organizations to the amount of funding, given that 1) many Belarusian organizations are located abroad, which has significantly increased the costs of their activities, 2) some organizations are engaged in activities that require significant financial expenditures.
- If possible, to take into account the mentioned problems in the field of labor remuneration of CSO employees and consider ways to increase salaries taking into account the economic situation and average income level both in Belarus and in the countries where Belarusian organizations/initiatives have relocated.

To relocated Belarusian business

- To pay attention to the Belarusian third sector and, in particular, to the Belarusian organizations/initiatives that are located in the same countries as the business companies. To consider establishing contacts, building cooperation and, possibly, supporting such organizations/initiatives. The support does not necessarily have to be financial; it can also be in-kind with business providing products, services, or premises for Belarusian organizations/initiatives. Such cooperation can be beneficial for businesses as well in terms of sharing experiences, project implementation practices, etc.

To Belarusian Democratic Forces and politicians

- To pay attention to new research in the sphere of Belarusian civil society and to continue considering its problems and needs especially in the context of requests for institutional funding and facilitation of reporting when forming an agenda for discussion with foreign partners.
- If possible, to strengthen interaction and hold additional consultations with Belarusian organizations/initiatives on the issues of their interaction with BigTech companies (Meta, Google, etc.) regarding the security of Belarusian users.

To Belarusian civil society organizations/initiatives

- To continue implementing successful projects of interaction and exchange of experience within the sector, including interaction between "old" and "new" organizations. As it is important not only for successful day-to-day functioning of the sector, but also for the democratization of the Belarusian society inside and outside the country. "New" organizations should pay attention to and take into account, if possible, the experience of "old" organizations in the areas where they have well-established practices. "Old" organizations should seek to find ethically correct and effective ways of interacting with the "newcomers".
- To pay attention and, if possible, work on strengthening cooperation with Belarusian business, which can ensure greater sustainability of the organizations/initiatives themselves in the long term.
- To pay attention, whenever possible, to the psychological state of their employees and initiate a "psychological audit" of the organization, inviting psychologists, as well as interacting with initiatives that provide psychological support.