

The situation with and urgent needs of Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs) in political crisis

Research report

2021

This study was conceived of and begun at the beginning of 2021, when it became obvious that the political crisis that started in Belarus after the 2020 elections was entering a protracted phase. The aim of the study was to analyze the role of both existing (and well-established) civil society organizations and new public initiatives that have arisen on the wave of protest, assess their potential, analyze the main problems they face, and identify their urgent needs.

The main empirical basis for analysis in this study include:

1. 5 semi-structured interviews with CSO activists focusing on the development of the third sector (March 2021);
2. an online CSO survey (23 April-24 May 2021, 62 questionnaires collected); and
3. 8 focus groups with representatives of different CSO sectors (19 April-12 May 2021, 67 participants total).

Since beginning this study the situation in civil society has undergone serious changes, and the political crisis in the country is not only unresolved but is deepening further and further. In this regard, some findings required adjusting by the research team, considering new information and events that occurred after collecting empirical data. We also plan to regularly release an overview of updates on this subject.

It is also worth noting that this study is part of a broader study that describes other sectors of society, including media, new activism, diaspora communities, and business.

OPERATING CONDITIONS AND STATE OF CSOS IN BELARUS IN 2020-2021

The conditions for the development of civil society are understood as a set of conditions that contributes to its development (enabling environment)¹. Traditionally, the set of such conditions includes:

- Political conditions: the possibility of realizing basic civil rights and freedoms and involvement of civil society in political decision-making and management processes.
- Economic and financial conditions: opportunities for obtaining and operating financial resources, financial stability of organizations, including issues involving the possibility of obtaining and using sponsorship, charitable, and foreign financial assistance and funds received through crowdfunding and crowdsourcing.

¹ The rationale for the need to consider just such a complex of conditions for the development of CSOs in Belarus can be found here: Civil society in Belarus: current state and conditions for development (2015-2017), p.5 // https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/DOC/1/2018_Civil-Society-Belarus_RU.pdf

- Legal conditions: legal framework and guarantees of civil rights and freedoms, conditions for registration and liquidation of organizations, conditions for operating finance and for the implementation of key activities.
- Institutional conditions: political culture, trust, stereotypes, motivation for social activities, decision-making procedures, and work organization.
- Media environment: level of informatization and digitalization, main channels for media consumption, development of different types of media and their influence and access, development of social networks, and characteristics of media consumption.

The civil society environment has deteriorated so rapidly in recent months that research and evaluation data are becoming outdated faster than we can analyze them.

Clearly, one of the most serious challenges is the changing **political** and legal environment. Given the political crisis, we, on the one hand, observed a high degree of political mobilization of society during the election campaign and post-election protests. On the other hand, it should be noted that the civil society structures and organizations that emerged by 2020 (including political parties) did not play a proactive role in these processes; that is, they were not their initiators. The drivers of political mobilization were completely different forces and subjects, while third sector organizations played more of a supporting role in ongoing processes and were involved in them, as a rule, at the level of activists' individual participation rather than at the institutional level. Since the attempt to change the existing political regime through public efforts did not lead to quick positive changes, today we have found ourselves in reactive position. Protest moods are suppressed by the authorities with the help of repressions and the Belarusian regime has neither a positive program for resolving the political crisis nor means of controlling the situation, save the use of force. Accordingly, realizing civil rights and freedoms in the country today is out of the question.

It is difficult to talk about **legal conditions** and the legal environment today for two reasons. First, many different negative changes of order and scale that occurred during this period require a separate analysis and cannot be concisely reflected on in this text². Second, under conditions of legal default, the concept of law loses its functional significance since law enforcement practice has deteriorated to the point that it makes analysis of legislative changes practically meaningless.

At the time when the survey of experts and CSO activists was conducted (April-March 2021), the “announced” general re-registration of public organizations caused serious concerns. It is still unclear in what time frame this initiative could be implemented, since it requires a lot of preparatory work on the part of state bodies. Today, a “simpler” repressive tactic is being implemented: unscheduled inspections of public organizations and the liquidation of legal entities. The latter was at first targeted and concerned non-profit institutions, but gradually

² More information on this aspect can be found in regular reviews by the Center for Legal Transformation // <http://www.lawtrend.org/>

was more broadly applied and began to concern public associations and organizations, the process of legal liquidation for which is more complicated (relative to institutions).

The pace of institutional repression against CSOs is growing. On July 30, 2021, Lukashenko said at a meeting with local activists that “as a result of the measures taken, 185 destructive organizations were identified that pose a potential threat to national security, including a representative office of a foreign non-profit organization, 71 national and local public associations, and 113 institutions.”³ It seemed that these figures were “suggestive” for carrying out institutional repression against the third sector, but in reality the scale turned out to be much larger. As of September 18, 2021, according to Lawtrend, 154 non-profit institutions and 89 public organizations, associations, and foundations were liquidated or were in the process of liquidation. On July 14, 2021, there was a series of arrests of activists of public organizations and searches of the offices of organizations and at the residencies of activists.

The rhetoric and actions of the Belarusian authorities today are aimed at destroying any independent activity in principle. Therefore, repressions and restrictions at the new stage will concern more and more not only those who disagree with the status quo, but also with respect to any initiative that does not originate and/or is not completely controlled by state bodies.

The deterioration of **economic conditions** for CSO activities is associated both with the significant restriction of access to external funding programs (refusal to register grants and an increase in the risk of harassment when receiving financial resources from outside the country in any form), and with a decrease in the volume of funding for public activities within the country (closure of crowdfunding platforms; outflow contributions and donations from citizens, first for campaigns related to countering COVID-19, then to help victims of repression and their families; and increasing risk for citizens and businesses (or fears associated with these risks), which are funded by public organizations and initiatives).

The **information and media environment** is also undergoing significant transformation. The most important aspects of this transformation include the radical polarization of state and non-state media and the transition to open information war; the closure of the tut.by portal and the moving abroad of several independent publications; politicization of the news cycle; the growth of repressions against non-state media and journalists; an increase in the role of social networks (primarily Telegram) both as a tool for disseminating information and for mutual coordination and organization among civil society actors.

The change in **institutional conditions** has been twofold. On the one hand, the mobilization upsurge in the summer-autumn of 2020 triggered many positive changes in the level of trust, solidarity, and activity of citizens. It inspired a rejection of the stereotypical perception of “politics” and “social activity” as “unworthy,” “dangerous” or as marginal spheres and work and activated an explosive process of forming a positive image of “self” as a

³ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nko-pod-vidom-blagotvoritelnosti-otrabyvajut-chuzhoj-politicheskij-zakaz-452930-2021/>

civic nation concomitant with the forming of many new civic initiatives and local communities. However, the rapid onset of a violent reaction calls into question the endurance and long-term nature of these effects.

Still, we can now see a quantitative and qualitative shift in the state of civil society that requires analyzing and considering both the state and problems of the “third sector” (organized civil society, existing “traditional” organizations of various types and thematic focus) and the massive surge of civic and public activity outside existing structures of civil society.

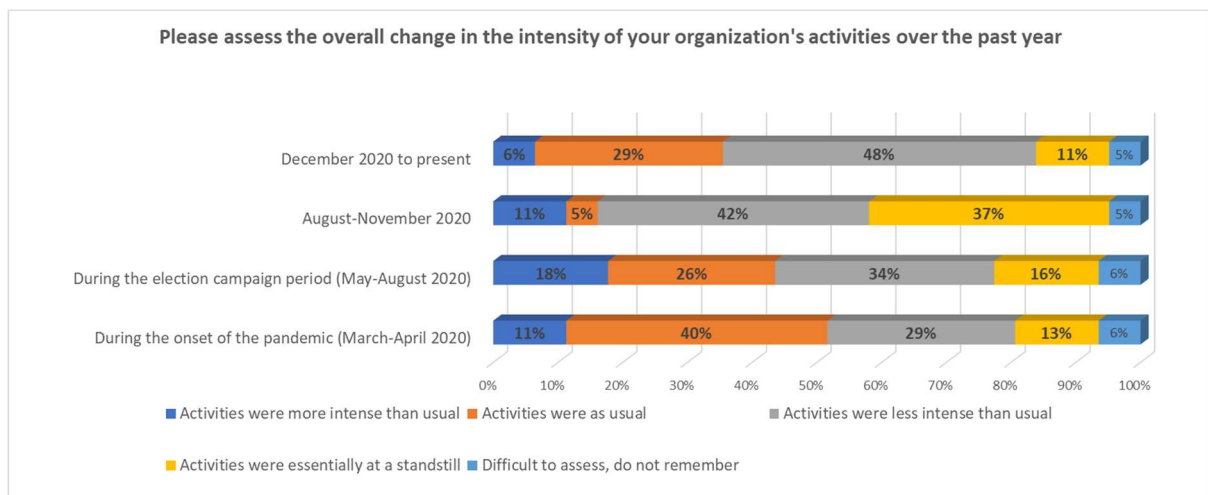
Another important process in 2020-2021 was the activation of the Belarusian diaspora in various countries during the election campaign and post-election protests. With the increase in the flow of refugees from Belarus, the role of the diaspora, new organizations, and initiatives created during this period in different countries, especially those close to Belarus geographically (Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine) that are accepting the bulk of migrants, is increasing.

1. ANALYSIS OF CSO SURVEY DATA

1.1. Dynamics of change and the most pressing problems for CSOs

The survey data show that since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the intensity of CSO activities has gradually decreased. In the most acute period of the political crisis (August-November 2020), most organizations worked either in a weakened state or essentially stopped their activities altogether. Since December 2020, CSOs have tried to return to their core agenda or adapt it for new tasks.

Fig. 1. Change in the intensity of organizations' work



However, a new round of repression beginning in July 2021 - institutional repression, directed not just against activists or organizations that were somehow involved in protest actions or which actively interacted with new communities, but against third sector organizations as such - has again forced CSOs to restructure their activities and shift their priorities.

One of the main challenges for CSOs at the time of the survey was the impossibility of long-term planning in a constantly changing and unfavorable environment. This is shown by both the survey results and the rating given to problems during focus groups, where the issues resulting from the impossibility of long-term planning invariably were ranked in the top three (except for the human rights sector, which is explained by their increased demand).

50 out of 62 respondents noted the problem of the unfeasibility of long-term planning, and another 38 (more than half) the impossibility of implementing plans and projects due to having the situation constantly change. In addition, 51 respondents noted that the statement

“We were forced to abandon our long-term plans indefinitely” is true or partially true for their organization.

Table 1. Challenges faced by CSOs

Which of the following problems did your organization encounter during the fall-winter 2020-2021?	%	Number
Long-term planning of activities has become impossible	81%	50
Employee and activist apathy, psychological fatigue, and/or burnout	76%	47
Impossible to implement plans and projects due to having the situation constantly change	61%	38
Securing external resources for the organization's activities has become risky	55%	34
Harassment of organization members because of their political or civic stance	53%	33
Possibilities for financing organization's activities from sources within the country has decreased	45%	28
Loss of employees and activists due to relocation to outside Belarus	35%	22
Decreasing public interest in the topics and issues we deal with	35%	22
Denial of or delay in registration of projects	18%	11
People leaving the organization because of fear or fatigue	15%	9
Groundless inspections and claims from various government agencies (FDI, tax services, Ministry of Emergency Situations, health inspectors, etc.)	13%	8
Other (please indicate)	10%	6
Conflicts within the organization associated with different views on the political crisis and ways to resolve it	8%	5
Conflicts associated with approaches to adapting the organization's activities under new conditions	5%	3
None of the above	2%	1

The reasons for the unfeasibility of long-term planning at the time of the survey were mainly owing to the political situation in the country. Respondents often noted that the situation with the coronavirus preceding the political crisis in a sense “prepared” organizations to respond more quickly to unexpected changes and the restructuring of plans and activities in a changing environment. However, the most common response to epidemiological concerns was “going online.” In turn, the political crisis and intensification of repression, which cannot be resolved with simple methods and tools, pose new challenges to organizations.

Today, to these challenges are added the question of how to continue the activities of organizations and institutions that have been or will soon be deprived of registration. That is,

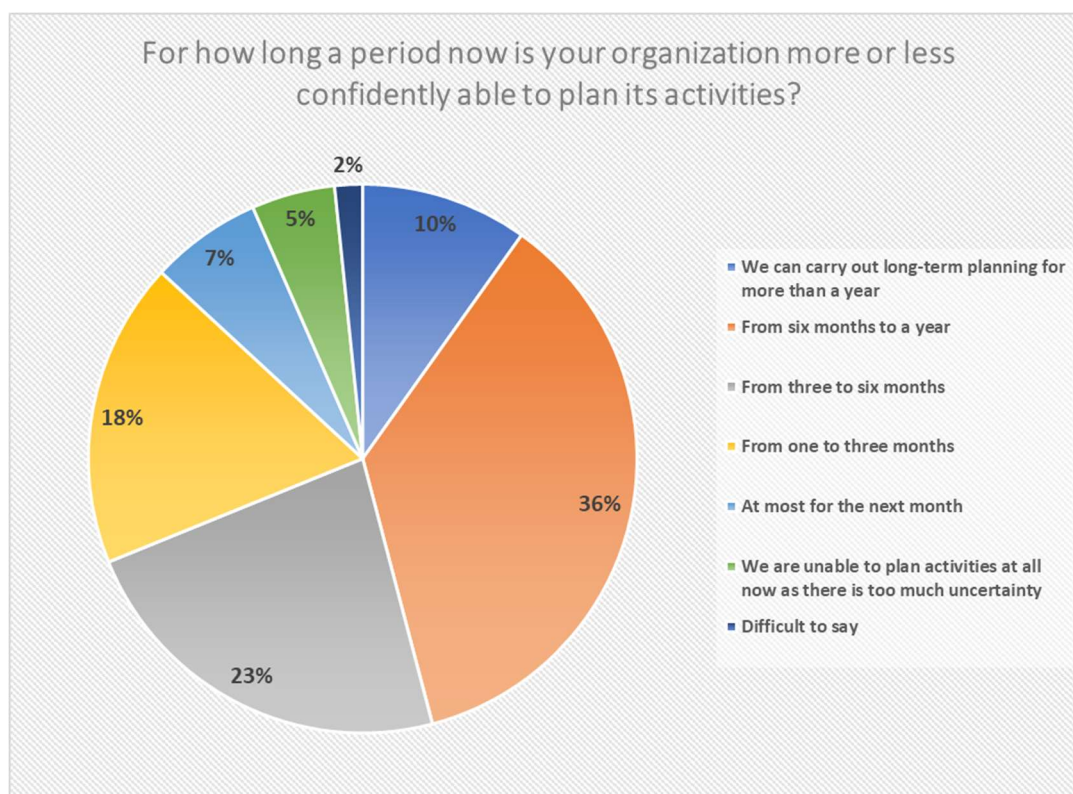
they are threatened with completely losing their legal status and associated (albeit limited) opportunities.

As far as factors hampering planning are concerned, it is not only the operating conditions for the organization itself but also the general situation in the country that affects, among other things, partners and different groups with which it needs to interact. Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow with the organizations with which joint actions have been planned; that is, how the position of local authorities may change relative to a particular project or event or how people will react to the agenda and areas of activity that organizations were engaged in previously.

Based on the results of focus group discussions, there is a difference in the ability to respond quickly to the changing conditions of CSOs depending on the type of funding. In the case of organizations whose funding is carried out mainly within the framework of project activities (strict conditions for spending funds), their ability to quickly and efficiently redirect funds was significantly limited. On the contrary, in situations where organizations had more freedom of handling their own budgets due to the presence of membership fees, a strong commercial component, etc., they could quickly restructure their work and redirect activities according to urgent requests. In a situation where planned activities become impossible to conduct and where, at the same time, new and challenging problems arise, organizations may need to quickly respond to changing conditions. Project financing, based on detailed action plans, indicators, and a budget to which they are tied makes such a response impossible.

About half of respondents cited a period of up to six months as a realistic timeframe for planning the activities of their organizations, while about a third considered a period from six months to a year possible.

Fig. 2. Prospective planning for CSOs



The focus group discussions show that even those organizations that have not abandoned long-term or strategic planning processes clearly understand that such planning hems now ties their hands and are not investing serious resources in these processes.

At the same time, some CSO activists, at the time of the survey, had psychologically resigned themselves to the need to act under conditions of high uncertainty. However, for many this was still frustrating, forcing them to abandon any planning at all.

Thus, **building an activity planning system under conditions of uncertainty, maintaining flexibility of managerial and organizational tools, and keeping open the possibility of reallocating financial resources to solve new, unexpectedly arising tasks is one of the most pressing needs of the third sector.**

The second important direction for maintaining the functioning and survival of the third sector is **ensuring the security of organizations and its members while holding on to staff and human potential.** At the time of the survey, half of organizations surveyed faced harassment of their members because of their political or civic positions. 8 out of 62 underwent baseless inspections and claims from various government agencies (the Department of Financial Investigations (FID), tax services, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, sanitary services, etc.).

As further developments show, the intensity of pressure on organizations, right up to their liquidation, is growing and most likely will continue to grow. The problem of increasing the level of repression and tightening legislation on the activities of CSOs also led in the top 5 rating of problems during focus groups. More importantly, however, is the task of ensuring the safety of organizations and the protection of activists, which was first concern for all CSO thematic sectors starting from human rights and ending with those working on social issues.

The repressive pressure on CSOs today has three main directions.

The first is the liquidation of human resources. Arrests, fines, administrative and criminal jail sentences, and the forced departure of leaders and/or members of organizations abroad is greatly weakening the third sector. And organizations across a wide range of thematic sectors are under such pressure. The greatest pressure is on human rights organizations, but today any activity in any sphere - from social services to research and analytical - is under threat. The development of skills for remote working, which began in the spring of 2020, somewhat reduces the damage associated with the forced departure of members of organizations abroad, but even so setting up processes requires additional resources, and the structure of relations and organization of activities are changing.

The second is the depriving of technical and institutional opportunities for activities: seizure of equipment and documents, seizure of accounts, refusals to provide space for events, inspections, liquidation of legal entities, etc.

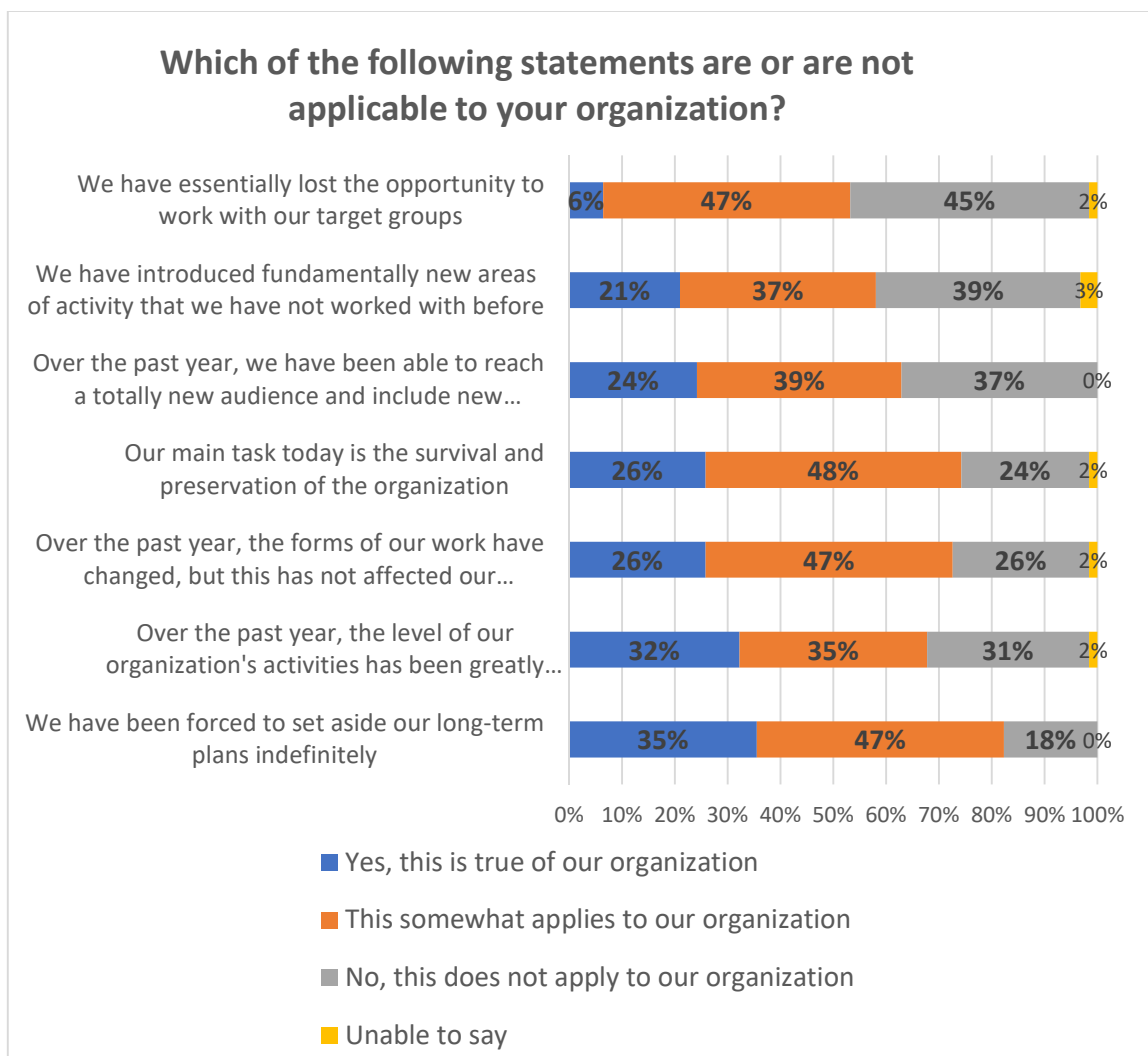
The third is a significant reduction in or limitation of funding opportunities for activities. Registration of grants in the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the Office of the President's Affairs is essentially suspended or is carried out sporadically and without any discernable logic. Even small grants for non-political (apolitical) social organizations working with vulnerable groups are not registered. Paradoxically, the formerly most sanctioned areas of activity (for example, registration of funds coming from abroad, participation in international projects) now pose a threat to organizations that worked legally during the period preceding the political crisis. Today, there remains (theoretically) the possibility of receiving external funding through concluding service contracts (the conclusion of agreements with individuals for the performance of certain work or the provision of services), however this is becoming more and more risky. When the rhetoric of the Cold War with the West is being whipped up and the fight against "foreign agents" is being discussed, any transparent funding from outside the country can become a pretext for persecution. Similarly, the possibilities for legal financing of CSOs within the country are narrowing, since it is not clear who, when, and for what reason people are labeled enemies of the state and donating money for public activities is becoming more and more risky for both businesses and ordinary citizens.

We are now facing the urgent issue of **the survival of existing structures and the preserving of the organizational and human potential accumulated in the third sector.**

Another important characteristic of the state and development of the third sector today is changes in the work with target groups and strategies of public involvement in general. These changes were initiated even at the beginning of the pandemic when the push to go online, on the one hand, resulted in many problems and restrictions and, on the other hand, opened new opportunities for CSOs that were able to adapt to new conditions and found new ways of conducting their activities.

About half of organizations surveyed (April - May 2021) noted problems with access to their target groups, but in most cases this did not mean a complete loss of connection with audiences, but only temporary problems and challenges. There are many more who note that over the past year their organizations have reached totally new audiences and target groups.

Fig. 3. CSO access to target groups



The problem of communication with target groups, and, more broadly, the involvement of new people in community activities in an unfolding political crisis is characterized by two multidirectional processes. On the one hand, in some cases public participation or CSO access to their target groups has been narrowed. This is typical for organizations working with vulnerable groups: people with disabilities, the elderly, large families, the LGBTK community, etc. For these target groups, the transition to online formats is much more difficult. They are also much more wary of being “involved” in politics or something illegal than other social strata and groups. Some organizations working with vulnerable groups, therefore, refuse not only to participate in CSO activities, but even to receive humanitarian aid.

The work of organizations that partnered with local communities and local urban projects on environmental problems, urban and rural development, involving residents in public discussions, city actions, landscaping, etc., became significantly more difficult. There have been problems in these areas before, but in most cases such activities were carried out either in partnership or at least in agreement with local authorities, and the activities themselves were considered by the state authorities to be useful and safe. However, as the political crisis unfolds any independent public activity is stigmatized and given the explosion of “courtyard activity” in the fall of 2020, local communities are particularly suspicious.

Some civil society organizations, trying to stay within their agenda and away from political issues, perceive it as a threat when people from “new communities” begin to participate in their activities. And local residents themselves begin to perceive even those forms of activity they previously considered possible as dangerous.

At the same time, the public mobilization of summer-autumn 2020 had great potential to expand the public base of CSO activities. Many third sector activists understood this. 50 out of 62 CSO activists surveyed in agreed that “the rise of public activity after the 2020 elections provides public organizations and initiatives with new opportunities.” However, networking and synergy between existing CSOs in Belarus and new initiatives is very limited. The problems of developing this kind of interaction lie in multiple areas, encompassing security issues, differences in representation (political and civic culture), mutual “ignorance” of each other, and differences in agendas. **Involvement of “new wave” activists in the activities of CSOs or strengthening the interaction and cooperation of established organizations and new initiatives could contribute to the development and strengthening of civil society generally under current challenging conditions.**

Another important characteristic of the current state of CSOs is the nature of relations with authorities at different levels. As the political crisis unfolds, this interaction (already of a limited nature) is steadily collapsing. Of the 62 CSO activists interviewed for this study, 49 responded that the level of interaction of their organization with the authorities at various levels changed during this period. 29 of these noted a decrease in the level of interaction and 19 its complete collapse. In most cases, the cessation of interaction took place at the initiative

of organizations themselves and not state bodies (23 over 14 and another 12 responding that it was a “mutual process”). Clearly, after the “clean-up” of CSOs - the liquidation of many organizations that took place after the survey was completed - the level of interaction with the authorities at all levels is continuing to decrease as the organizations being liquidated lose their institutional capacity for this.

The reasons why CSOs have refused to interact with authorities rest at different levels.

The first concerns the political and ethical issues of cooperation with the regime, which has lost its legitimacy and is carrying out massive repressions against its own citizens. Focus group discussions demonstrated that CSO activists have different attitudes towards the collective responsibility of government structures and individual officials in the current situation. There is a position held in which cooperation with representatives of government at any level is fundamentally impossible, and a softer position that allows a selective approach to this issue. In general, the problem of interaction with the authorities and officials is quite painful. Those organizations and activists who justify maintaining relations with the state explain this through talking about the interests of their target groups, the personal non-involvement of certain officials and structures in the crimes of the regime, and the need to refrain from splitting and polarizing society, however they voice their position tentatively, as if making excuses.

The second important reason for ceasing interaction with the authorities at any level are security concerns. Contacting government agencies - especially through providing alternative information, criticism, or suggestions - has become dangerous for public organizations in any field of activity. But even when events or campaigns are “positive” in nature, activists feel threatened through contact with representatives of the authorities since any public activity at any time can be regarded as destructive.

The last reason is the fact that since the fall of 2020, authorities and officials at both the national and local levels began to refuse to interact with public organizations. At first, this process did not have an all-encompassing character and largely depended on a number of factors: the situation in a particular region or city, personal characteristics and positions of officials, the position and nature of the activity of organizations, etc. However, with the start of institutional repressions against the third sector and the liquidation of organizations and institutions, one can assume with a high degree of likelihood that the role of situational factors will decrease and soon the authorities will select “public organizations” for partnership. The strategy of getting rid of self-organized civil society actors and “substituting” them with GONGOs (non-governmental organizations created by the state) has already been implemented by the Belarusian regime during periods of political upheaval (for example, after the elections of 2006 and 2010, or in 2012, when the authorities tried to use the system of public advisory councils to build a “civil society vertical”).

It is possible to predict such changes in the future (although it is difficult to specify a time frame) when, following harsh rhetoric and actions towards public organizations as such, the regime will move to assert that there are also “useful” public organizations. In this case, Belarusian CSOs (those who are not destroyed outright) are waiting for another “casting” for loyalty and flexibility, during which organizations will be selected and interaction with which will imitate dialogue between the state and civil society.

It should be noted that the problem of restoring relations between CSOs and the authorities was not perceived by the majority of focus group participants as urgent at the fieldwork stage of the study (April-May 2021). Even though this creates significant obstacles for many organizations, forcing them to revise plans, means, and areas of work, there has been an understanding that until the political crisis has been resolved and the situation has changed that it made no sense to build strategies to reestablish interaction with government agencies.

1.2. Activity priorities and urgent tasks for CSOs

During the survey of CSOs in April-May, we asked how activists see their organization in a year. Most of the answers can be boiled down to that of one respondent: “Two options: 1. Expanding the target audience and the scope of activities; or 2. Complete closure.” For some, a more realistic option at that time was “complete closure,” whereas for others it was “expansion,” but in the overwhelming majority of cases, the future of a person’s organization was connected with the resolution (or not resolution) of the country’s political crisis and the general conditions for CSO activities.

Survey participants named ensuring security as the most urgent task for their organization. Security was invariably a top priority among focus groups as well.

In second place was the issue of finding new ways of working with their target groups. Establishing or expanding engagement with new initiatives that emerged in the fall of 2020 has been a need for far fewer organizations. Maintaining a focus on target groups is also confirmed through an analysis of the results of focus groups, where “helping your target groups” has consistently been a greater priority than developing relationships with “new communities” and initiatives.

More than half of respondents noted that one of the most urgent tasks is finding resources to support the basic activities of their organizations, which describes a situation of civil society organizations in survival mode.

It should be noted that in the ranking of urgent tasks of organizations, the need for increasing the amount of work with local authorities occupies a lower position. During focus groups, this was almost always at the bottom of rankings.

Table 2. Relevant tasks for CSOs

Which of the following tasks are relevant for your organization today? (April-May 2021)	%	Number (out of 62)
Ensure the safety of employees, activists, and the organization as a whole	79%	48
Find new ways of working with target groups	69%	42
Find resources to support the minimum of organization activities	61%	37
Establish or expand interaction with new initiatives and local communities that began to form in the fall of 2020	43%	26
Creating a strategy for working with new target groups that have appeared in the wake of last year's events	43%	26
Restructure to work with new topics and problems that have become relevant because of socio-political transformations in country	41%	25
Expand interaction with business	34%	21
Opportunity to promote agenda more broadly through the media	33%	20
Increase the level of cooperation with local authorities	8%	5
Other	3%	2

In responses to the question what tasks for Belarusian public organizations and initiatives (for the sector as a whole) will be relevant in the future (until the end of the year), survival and security are often heard.

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

- Solving internal tasks (maintaining organizations and holding on to staff/volunteers), establishing work processes under new conditions (ensuring sustainable funding, holding events online, remote office work, solving security issues, problems of emotional burnout)
- Adapting to constantly deteriorating conditions, searching for new approaches, forms of work, topics, and areas of activity; finding your place and defining your role in a changed situation
- Consolidation within the sector and development of connections with new initiatives and business and developing cooperation and solidarity
- Support for civic initiatives and local activists; shifting the focus of activities to local community development and civic education
- “Authorization” of CSOs (raising awareness of the third sector of itself as an actor serving in a socio-political situation, developing a common agenda and strategy of action to resolve the political crisis, developing communication and interaction with political forces)

The necessity of “finding a balance” in relations with the authorities and building relationships with them was mentioned three times.

25 out of 68 third sector activists interviewed noted “reorganizing to work with new topics and problems that have become relevant in connection with the socio-political transformations in the country” as an urgent task for their organization. The need to work with new topics that are relevant today for the Belarusian society was also noted in responses to questions regarding current tasks for the sector. The most important problems that the CSO activists interviewed were ready to take part in tackling are civic education, local community development, and promotion of Belarusian culture.

Table 3. Relevant topics and challenges for CSOs’ work

What relevant issues would you and your organization like and would be able to participate in resolving? (April-May 2021)	%	Number (out of 62)
Civic education and raising the level of civic competency	77%	47
Local community development	69%	42
Promotion of Belarusian culture and language	51%	31
Development of local government	39%	24
Helping vulnerable social groups in times of crisis	31%	19
Bridging the split in Belarusian society and conflict mediation	31%	19
Business development	23%	14
Legal assistance and consultation	20%	12
Human rights activities	8%	5
Assistance to physicians and the healthcare system	7%	4
Other	15%	9

Moreover, most often the choice of these tasks is determined by the existing experience and competencies of the organization. Among the “new” topics that organizations have not worked with before, but would be willing to try, are most often community work, self-government, and conflict mediation.

1.3. Relevant needs in capacity development and in new competencies, approaches, and knowledge

During focus groups, the priority “organizational development, mastering new skills and competencies given changed conditions” turned out to be the most significant for CSOs working with culture, youth, urban and local development, and education. This was much lower a priority for representatives of organizations working with an environmental agenda, on social problems, and on CSO development and was essentially an insignificant concern for human rights activists.

Specifying exactly what skills and competencies are lacking in organizations today can be divided into two sections. The first is everything related to security - digital, physical, and the security of organizations and its members. The second is the managerial and organizational competencies that would enable organizations to continue to operate in a continually changing environment.

A survey of CSOs confirms the relevance of these two topics, with the more immediate needs being ensuring digital security and competence in planning activities in uncertain conditions. Having donors adapt their rules for working in new conditions was noted as a need by 30 out of 68 activists interviewed, whereas the need for additional financial resources to adapt to new conditions was indicated by 28 respondents.

Table 4. Emerging needs of CSOs

What new needs did your organization have in connection with the changes in the operating environment over the past year? (April-May 2021)	%	Number
Digital security	71%	44
Skills in planning activities under uncertain conditions	65%	40
Organizing management processes remotely	60%	37
Providing physical security	53%	33
IT and online technology skills	48%	30
Donors to adapt rules for working with organizations	48%	30
Legal assistance	47%	29
Additional financial resources to adapt to new conditions	45%	28
Forging connections with totally new audiences	39%	24
Something else:	3%	2
No new needs arose	2%	1

It should be noted that the understanding of “digital security” is growing among CSO activists. Some are no longer talking about ensuring security as a kind of set of actions, but about “cyber hygiene” as learned and regularly practiced skills. Despite the large number of trainings, guidelines, and materials on digital security as well as focus group discussions, the practice of detentions and arrests of activists shows that ensuring digital security in CSOs is often a serious problem. Today, different approaches to this problem are needed - not only training in the general set of knowledge, but also targeted diagnostics and tuning of the digital security and “hygiene” system for organizations and/or individual activists. Such practices exist, but they clearly require development and extension.

Another area that has seen relatively new demand for CSOs is readiness for the possibility of search and detention of individual activists and organizations. In practice, CSO activists and other citizens often lack understanding of how to behave during a search or

interrogation, how to provide quick communication and information in emergency situations, how to find a lawyer, how to interact with other organization members in the event of a supervisor or activists being detained, etc.

A more complex area of organizational development that is now being talked about as a need is providing for the functioning and management of organizations in an unstable and uncertain environment. The solution to this problem requires:

- 1) an increase in the degree of freedom in planning relevant work (that is, the absence of rigid requirements through external obligations when implementing projects),
- 2) building a management system based on a constant analysis of the conditions of work and public demands; and
- 3) high-quality administration of processes in reviewing work, redistribution of duties, etc.

Most organizations do not have sufficient resources to provide all these elements. There is demand for analytics and monitoring of socio-political processes and changes in the third sector, which would give individual organizations the opportunity to navigate the situation and determine their own strategies for action.

Among the areas of support that were most relevant in April-May 2021, the priorities for both individual organizations and the sector were “support for the organization’s fixed costs,” “organizational development,” and “creation and support of CSO coalitions.” It can be assumed that with the deterioration of conditions for the work of CSOs, such support will be even more in demand. At the same time, it is necessary to understand that for organizations that are now subject to repression, searches, and liquidation of their legal entities - but which intend to continue working - operational and institutional support is increasingly in demand, but in completely new forms. There are new needs for spending on equipment to replace that which was seized, rent for personal housing, new types of legal services and consultations, relocation and setup costs in a new country, etc.

Table 5. Relevant areas of support

What areas of support are most relevant at the moment (April-May 2021):	For your organization	For your sector
Support for the organization's fixed costs (accounting, rent, utility bills, taxes, etc.)	59%	67%
Organizational development - new skills, competencies, etc.	56%	61%
Creation and support of coalitions, associations, networks, and other community organizations for NGO joint action	56%	61%
Domestic advocacy campaigns	30%	39%

International advocacy campaigns	15%	13%
Difficult to say	13%	8%
Other (please indicate)	11%	7%

Another relevant area of support is the creation and support of coalitions, associations, and networks for joint work of public organizations. This topic was also raised in focus group discussions, but we were unable to get any substantive feedback on the kind of issues such associations would look to tackle under current conditions. The demand for partnerships and a consolidation of work looks more like an expression of a psychological need for unification in a deteriorating environment than as real and rationalized plans to create certain forms of associations with specific tasks.

Finally, advocacy campaigns both inside and outside the country are the least relevant area of support, and this area of CSO activities was also not highlighted in focus groups. Many CSO activists do not see opportunities for advocacy in their areas of work, both due to the prevailing legal and institutional conditions and due to a lack of resources for such activities.

In addition to the options identified in the questionnaire, CSO activists who participated in the survey also indicated the development of digital skills and IT competencies as relevant areas for support. At the same time, increasing the digital literacy of their target groups and in society generally was indicated as a separate area. Under conditions where a significant part of CSO activities has moved online, this undertaking seems urgent.

Anti-burnout and rehabilitation programs were also named as a separate area of needed support, aimed at both CSO activists and other target groups: artists, students, journalists, local community activists, etc. Here creative residencies, internships, short-term “sabbatical” or guest visits to organizations close to an individual’s profile could work; that is, various formats that combine professional development with psychological support.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

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

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

The changed conditions of existence (environment) for civil society require abandoning the traditional schemes of CSO interaction with various stakeholders, including the state (national and local authorities).

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