

Between Survival and Standby: A Review of Civil Society in the Regions of Belarus

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Research report

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“What kind of support do you need? - That’s a tough question, that’s what I want to say - praying, you know, for things to change, I think, other mechanisms, [!] don’t know”.

“And on the other hand, you should probably do it in a concentration camp, too, so that you don’t lose your humanity, so that you have some horizontal connections just in case, which may work at some point in time”.

From interviews.

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INTRODUCTION

We write this text under increasingly challenging conditions for the Belarusian civil society. Repressions within Belarus are on the rise, with lists of those labeled by authorities as “extremists” and “terrorists” expanding, ongoing arrests and persecution of activists, and people being forced to leave the country, among other issues. Additionally, the situation for Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists who have relocated to other countries is not always stable and often entails new risks and threats. Specifically, in Georgia, due to the pro-Russian orientations of the government, and in Lithuania, because of the growing trend toward securitization, relocated Belarusian organizations and activists increasingly experience insecurity and uncertainty regarding their stay in these countries.

In this study, which continues to monitor the state of Belarusian civil society organizations¹, we have chosen to primarily focus on organizations that currently exist and, in most cases, continue to operate at the local level within Belarus. We have opted for this research focus because such organizations have not been the primary subject of separate studies in recent years; they have been discussed primarily as a part of the broader civil society landscape. As an exception, we can mention a few publications in the collection of texts united under the title “Belarusian Civil Society 2015-2020”², which reviewed the situation with CSOs in the regions of Belarus and partially touched upon the impact of the events of 2020 and the subsequent political crisis.

According to the aforementioned review³, the period from 2015 to 2020 witnessed significant qualitative growth and development of civil society organizations in all regions of Belarus. Although, it was observed that this development occurred somewhat “against the will” of the authorities or involved the authorities merely imitating intersectoral interaction. At the same time, some new initiatives emerged and gained popularity, along with the development of intra- and intersectoral cooperation in all regions of Belarus. The mass protest mobilization during the summer and fall of 2020 had an impact on all regions, giving rise to new horizontal initiatives, vibrant local communities, and a general surge in civic activism. However, the relatively positive trends in the development of organized civil society before the events of 2020 and the outburst of civic activism following the elections faced unprecedented repression,

¹ Previous studies include the [report](#) “State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in a Situation of Political Crisis” (2021), the [study](#) “State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in a Situation of Political Crisis (Monitoring: July - December 2021)”, the [study](#) “State and Current Needs of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in a Situation of Political Crisis (Monitoring: January - July 2022)”, and the [study](#) “Is everything new well-forgotten old? Situation overview of Belarusian civil society initiatives that emerged after 2020 (Monitoring: July - December 2022)”.

² Section 1.2. “Regional CSOs in 2015-2021: Subjects, Processes, Features of Development” in the collection “Belarusian Civil Society 2015-2020”.

https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/65/58/Belaruskaya_hramadzjanskaya_supolnasc_2015_2021.pdf

³ Ibid.

affecting both organized civil society and individual activists, after the active phase of the protests was suppressed. This repression continues to this day.

The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the situation and analyze the state of civil society organizations and initiatives in Belarus at the local level during the first half of 2023, with a retrospective examination of the development of the situation over the past three years since the onset of the political crisis. To achieve this goal, we have established several tasks, including a review of various aspects of local organizations and initiatives, which include:

- General characteristics of the organizations: including their legal status, location (inside or outside Belarus, mixed format) of both the organizations themselves and their activists, and the directions of their activities.
- Overview of repressions and their impact on civil society.
- Analysis of potential actions by regional CSOs within Belarus in the context of repressions.
- Assessment of the state of local civil society organizations and initiatives: encompassing general characteristics of the sector, features of organization development, their access to target audiences, internal processes, and the challenges they encounter.
- Sectoral and intersectoral cooperation.
- The situation concerning donor support, satisfaction with existing programs, and the needs of organizations/initiatives.
- Impact of the war in Ukraine on civil society in Belarus at the local level.

In all these areas we tried to identify whether there are any local peculiarities in the activities of organizations/initiatives. In addition, we posed the following research questions:

- Have repressive restrictions on the activities of civil society organizations and initiatives led to a lack of services and/or various activities for the population in the regions of Belarus?
- Is the state trying to compensate for the resulting vacuum through its own activities, GONGO activities or co-optation of activities of some CSOs?

As part of the research, 17 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted between July and August 2023 with representatives of various local organizations and initiatives, as well as experts from various fields. Among the 17 interviewees, 13 were located outside Belarus, and 4 were in Belarus. All the “foreign” experts work with local Belarusian CSOs, with some of them having left Belarus just recently. The selection of interviewees was based on the principle of contact accessibility and using the snowball method. We managed to engage representatives from organizations in all regions of Belarus: two from Minsk, two from the Minsk region, two from the Brest region, two from the Viciebsk region, two from the Hrodna region, three from the Homiel region, and four from the Mahilyow region. Interviewees reside in both regional centers and smaller cities.

Given the extreme sensitivity of the topic, we made every effort to anonymize our informants as well as their locations. Nevertheless, several individuals located in Belarus whom we approached with the request of interview declined to talk to us, citing concerns for their safety. Additionally, the study does not present certain findings that, in the authors' opinion, could potentially result in further repressive actions within Belarus.

The organizations and initiatives mentioned in this study have different legal statuses:

1. Organizations that are still registered in Belarus;
2. Organizations in the process of liquidation;
3. Liquidated organizations.

A number of organizations belonging to the last two categories continue to operate in Belarus as networks, horizontal structures, or initiatives.

In terms of quantitative composition, the organizations/initiatives surveyed have a membership ranging from 4 to 30 people, and their stated reach among target audiences varies from several dozens to several thousand individuals. Thematically, the survey encompasses a wide range of organizations working in areas such as urban development, local advocacy, gender issues, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, non-formal education, media activism, creative development, social issues, etc.

I. ABOUT ORGANIZATIONS: STATUS, NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES AND LOCATION

The organizations and initiatives that are in the focus of this study have different legal status. Some of them are still registered in Belarus, some are in the process of liquidation, and some have been liquidated. Speaking about the last two categories, their representatives continue to act as networks, horizontal structures or initiatives. Leaders, managers and some activists are located outside Belarus, but all the organizations we spoke to have employees or activists inside Belarus. They count between 4 and 30 members, and their stated outreach to target audiences varies from several dozen to several thousand individuals. All CSOs/initiatives engage in various activities within Belarus, although, in some cases, these activities are of a more individual nature, such as expert or coaching roles. Additionally, our sample includes an activist who, while abroad, collaborates with local horizontal initiatives that emerged during the peak of the 2020 protest mobilization in one of Belarus' cities.

Some of the local organizations we spoke to are registered abroad, while others are still in the process of obtaining legal status. Typically, the decision to register abroad is directly linked to how long ago the organization's leader left the country. When the heads of the organization are still located in Belarus, they might have no foreign registration at all. The period of departure from Belarus varied greatly among our interviewees; some had left the country a long time ago, while others had departed less than two months before our conversation.

In addition, during the interviews, activist mentioned that local authorities (in case they do not repress organizations/initiatives) “*strongly recommend*” people working for them to call themselves “*volunteers*”, as such a status seems to look “less suspicious” in their view.

“When people are called in for conversations, they are told, among other things: don't mention the words ‘activism’, ‘activist’, ‘urbanism’. Use ‘volunteer’ [instead]. These are now environmental volunteers or social volunteers”.

In terms of thematic areas, the organizations and initiatives included in the sample of this study cover a wide range, addressing topics such as urban development, local advocacy, gender issues, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, non-formal education, media activism, creative development, social issues, and more.

II. HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT AND REPRESSION

Unfortunately, in 2023, repression is an inevitable context for the activities of Belarusian CSOs/initiatives and people who are involved in their activities at the national and local levels. Thus, repressions affected all the representatives and their organizations in our sample to a greater or lesser extent. Most of the interviewees went through searches at the offices of their organizations or at home (or both). Many went through administrative courts and arrests, appear in criminal cases and had to leave the country. For those in Belarus, repressions are the main factor that determines their daily life, as well as their activities, willingness and ability to participate in any projects and activities.

In general, the problem of security and repression is a primary and identical issue for all organizations operating at the local level in any city in the country, without highlighting any particular regional differences. In assessing the level of repression, our interlocutors generally said that they did not observe any particular difference in the nature of harassment and types of repression from region to region. At the same time, however, there were opinions that the city of Minsk and western regions (in particular, Brest and Hrodna regions) faced a higher level of repression than others. This was explained by the fact that in these regions, due to the high level of protest mobilization, there was a de facto “cleansing” (*zachistka* in Russian) of both mobilized citizens and organized civil society. In Hrodna region, this was accompanied by the replacement of local government leaders with “external” ones.

Based on general observations and opinions expressed during the interviews, we can conclude that the degree of repression against civil society is directly interrelated and interconnected with both the overall level of protest mobilization, repression and the severity of suppression of protests, as well as with the development and diversity of civil society organizations and initiatives. In the regions and cities where the level of protest mobilization was higher, correspondingly, a higher level of repression against civil society is recorded.

“But here it also depends on how developed the various regional NGOs were before the legal collapse. In [City 1] everything was, for example, a little better than in [City 2], because any activities that used to take place there, except for one or two cases, they simply stopped, because in [City 1] there were fewer of them and, accordingly, it was easier to ‘clamp down’ on them. This is not to say that it was tougher on NGOs specifically. It was just easier to cover it up somehow in [City 1]. Conventionally speaking, there’s [one known organization]. You call people who are related to it once for a conversation with the KGB - and, in fact, 50% of public life in [City 1] just stops...”

The interviewees sadly and ironically noted that in one of the eastern regions, the repressive institutions were not “working out well”, as not all civil society organizations had been closed, and the level of pressure on them was relatively lower than in other regions. At the same time, it was highlighted that the level of activism and the number of organizations and initiatives in this region have consistently been lower than in other areas.

It was also observed that in several cases, some cities experienced a higher level of repression compared to the regional or even national averages. Typically, this was attributed to local initiatives, where local law enforcers or officials, for various reasons, initiated and executed repression against civil society and activists in the most severe manner.

“... We thought that it might be related to the fact that the local authorities themselves decide, some kind of payoff was given. And we proceeded from this logic, that the local authorities decide who to repress and who not to repress, and [they] decided that there was no reason to quarrel with local people, we’ll live as we used to live ...”

“There is a small town here - [name of the town]. There, if you compare it with some other town, it is unclear, someone is in charge of it, someone is cruel ...”

At the same time, it was noted that law enforcers living in the same city where the organizations operate, as a rule, did not demonstrate excessive cruelty. The most severe repressions and violations of human rights were typically executed by “visiting” law enforcement officials brought in from other cities or regions.

“Even before, when I talked to the chief of police, back then in 2020, they would say, ‘...We respect you’. They try not to pull us so much. Well, those are ours. And it was from [name of a regional center] that came to me, they were not ceremonious there. Although I saw that they were taking me, and I said: ‘I’m not resisting’. But they still wanted a picture: [hands] clamped, handcuffs [put on] ... “

At the same time, there is a prevailing opinion that, particularly at the local level, such as in relatively small towns, law enforcement officials, and those involved in searches, arrests, and interrogations typically attempted to avoid excessive harshness and cruelty. This can be attributed to the familiarity among people living in the same towns, especially smaller ones, resulting in a smaller social distance. Consequently, they either acted with concern for their own safety and that of their families or due to other subjective factors, leading to a less aggressive approach.

As part of the features of repression against civil society at the local level, it was emphasized that activists might not necessarily face imprisonment but rather find themselves subjected to constant pressure in the form of regular checks, summons for interrogations, and interviews.

“It often happens that they do not put people in jail, but they are dragged around endlessly. It turns out that everyone has been dragged around more than once, and now they don’t trust each other, they don’t know who is snitching on whom. From the very beginning people shared more: here, I was summoned, they asked about you, etc. Now they just go one by one and don’t tell anyone much”.

An additional effect of this behavioral strategy of law enforcers and local authorities is that people on the ground trust each other less, do not share information about what is happening, and choose the strategy of not acting, hiding, going underground. It was also mentioned that local activists can prepare for emigration (learn foreign languages, programming and other skills that could be potentially useful in other countries).

“Many people are, in a sense, ‘in a safehouse’. They have their own lives and are not interested in anything... I also see that some are quietly preparing for emigration by learning languages online (avoiding courses, especially since there has been a crackdown on Polish courses and schools) and gaining skills in IT and programming languages. In general, they have plans to move quietly”.

As an important feature of repressions, we can also note that since they are far from having any rationality and logic, some organizations are still not liquidated and maintain formal operational possibilities. While it might present a certain window of opportunity, it might simultaneously cause negative consequences, contributing to heightened distrust among organizations. They are left puzzled about why certain organizations face liquidation while others do not, why some are permitted to undertake certain actions while restrictions are imposed on others etc.

“There is a question to our organization too, why all organizations are liquidated and closed, but yours is not closed”.

Interviewees who are in Belarus and have firsthand observations suggest that while repression has undeniably impacted and continues to affect the activities of all organizations and initiatives in the country, Minsk, being the capital and the largest city, is comparatively a less risky environment for operation. This is primarily due to its size and the presence of a remaining diversity.

“... It is as if in Minsk there are more events, activities, and they are as if they are more open, because they are published in channels for 2,000 people, for 3,000 people. That is, we can't afford to do that in [city name], because we realize that if we publish our announcement in some channel, the risks just increase many times, and it will definitely be noticed, because it is [city name]. And in Minsk it seems as if there is such an opportunity for organizations and initiatives to carry out such offline activities even without registration”.

After the authorities have largely “cleaned up” and liquidated organizations in the regions, pressure and repression have descended from the organizational to the individual level. Law enforcement officers and representatives of local authorities exert pressure on individual activists.

“That is, roughly speaking, while before it was possible to systematically, openly (first of all, systematically) carry out your activities, after the summer of 2021 it is no longer possible. And after February 2022, even an individual regional activist [no longer can]. And since they have always been, in fact, penciled in by the law enforcers, they have also been restricted in their activities. ... People are even afraid to file complaints and claims. And people are not unreasonably afraid ...”

Apart from imprisonment and forced emigration, the consequences of repression encompass job terminations and, essentially, a professional ban. Individuals “exposed” in the third sector struggle to secure employment. It's important to note that pressure on those engaged in local organizations can originate from various official and governmental institutions. This pressure is

not limited to law enforcement agencies; it may also originate from other institutions within the areas where organizations and initiatives are active, including social security and protection agencies, especially when the CSO operates in this field.

“They [the Social Security Administration] have repeatedly checked, given a request for me to bring them documents, checked the notebooks. They set their schedules and rules for writing in these notebooks. Well, this is the kind of paperwork where they picked on every word, every action, every document we create”.

The main negative consequence of repressions has been a transformation in the structure of civil activism, both at the local level and throughout the country. Repressions play a pivotal role in shaping the activities of civil society in Belarus. While we did not identify any distinct regional patterns in the nature of repressions, it is evident that in regions and cities with a more developed and diverse third sector, higher levels of protest mobilization in 2020, and when driven by the initiative of local law enforcers and/or officials, repressions tend to be of a larger scale.

III. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

Amid repressions and the accompanying challenges, Belarusian organizations and initiatives operating at the local level persist in conducting a variety of activities within and outside the country. Throughout the research, we gained insights into the overall state of civic engagement and activism at the local level, understanding what is feasible and restricted in the current conditions, as well as the achievements (whether personal or those of their colleagues in the sector) that the interviewees would like to highlight.

Regrettably, the discussions surrounding this topic mostly revolved around limitations and constraints, rather than opportunities for action. The focus was on the numerous prohibitions and risks that are challenging to rationalize. The interviewees mentioned absence of or the constant changes in the “rules of the game”, referring to the regulations governing the activities of organizations and initiatives on the ground.

“Whenever something is more large-scale, more visible, they immediately call and explain that it is not allowed... And there are no written, clear rules. It is always an open question: whether they will call, ban it or not”.

The constant threat of detention, arrest, and physical reprisals is ever-present among activists, often leading organizations and initiatives to promptly cancel events in Belarus when they receive a signal or have reason to suspect that their activities might be in focus of secret services.

“We monitor the risks every time. There are often situations when we receive threats and postpone the event. Or someone [receives] another call from the authorities, and we don't plan anything just in case, or we assess the risks in some other way, and we cancel it [the event]”.

As repressions intensified in the regions, it became evident that certain forms of activism vanished, and there were no longer events in areas traditionally managed by local activists and organizations. For instance, interviewees mentioned the sphere of culture.

“There are no cultural events at all. There is something hanging in the city gallery, of course, but there used to be some small exhibitions, music festivals. Now there is nothing like that”.

The prevalence of self-censorship is increasing, with individuals in the regions of Belarus, involved in on-site activities, adopting significant precautions when coordinating offline events (self-imposed restrictions were also noted related to online activities). This approach is not only aimed at minimizing the risk of harassment but is also employed to create a safer environment for offline events participants and, whenever possible, reduce the prevailing atmosphere of fear.

“There are still problems, of course, because there are dangers and fear. ... It still must be taken into account. So now even online we try to gather in small groups, ... to, most importantly, relieve [people] of fear so that they can express themselves in some way”.

Inside Belarus, organizations try not to conduct mass events and limit themselves to a narrow circle of people who can be verified. When discussing what can and is being done in the regions based on their experience, the activists mentioned the following types of activities:

1. Initiating and implementing a variety of local initiatives aimed at improving territories, addressing various communal and environmental problems, and responding to citizens' requests for urban environment enhancement.

“If people went to clean the beach and nothing bad happened, it’s seen as a success. You can do some very localized initiatives: clean the beach, repair a playground in your neighborhood...”

2. Monitoring the situation in cities, identifying issues in communal and urban planning, and reporting them to local authorities. Collecting signatures to raise these issues with local authorities is another possibility. Representatives of local organizations and initiatives also help citizens with drafting appeals and complaints for issue resolution. Furthermore, they offer support and assistance to socially active individuals in the regions. It is worth noting that representatives of these public organizations/initiatives who engage in support and consultation might be based abroad.

“But there are people who were just actively in touch with us, who themselves are active on the ground, worrying about local life, about problems. So, they are also kind of social activists, you could say... They are just active local residents... They are in touch with us, and we continue our activities with them to a certain extent”

3. Monitoring the activities of state bodies, especially courts, supporting political prisoners through letters, preparing and sending care packages, and engaging in various human rights activities

“... Participating in courtroom observations is undoubtedly an accomplishment, attending various pro-government, if you will, events that lack media coverage... Plus, providing direct assistance to the relatives of political prisoners, very technical assistance, including transferring medicines and preparing and delivering care packages to pre-trial detention centers”

“First of all, there is the support for political prisoners and their families: financial assistance, various forms of psychological support, and what we might call holiday assistance, for Christmas, New Year, March 8. People in this city help the families of political prisoners as much as they can, donating money for gifts. The diaspora, those who were forced to leave this city, also contribute significantly here”

It is emphasized that these human rights activities are important not only *ad hoc* but also serve the function of socialization and uniting people with similar values. They demonstrate that individuals are not alone in their ideas and beliefs, showing that there are like-minded people.

“We also try to conduct some non-public events, for example, with the signing of postcards to political prisoners, but not for the purpose of support only. It is clear that by no means all the letters get there. But just for people to communicate, to see that they are not alone, that they are still a team, that there is still some kind of life - a hopeful factor”.

4. Organizing creative spaces, clubs, and activities for socialization and communication. Conducting group sessions on a variety of creative activities in different forms. In this context, creative activities serve as the foundation for bringing people together and creating comfortable and relatively safe conditions for informal communication, as well as for discussing topics and issues of concern.

“What else is possible? Just gathering together. Those of us who are brave enough, we come together. I don't know, you can even come to ... the workshop, hang out... That's just the way we gather here, so the four or five of us can share news, and not just news. You can discuss whatever you want, whatever topic you want to pick up. The main thing is to have a facilitator, and they are not all gone, so we use this kind of thing, but up to 7 people. ... So, it is possible, small groups can meet”.

It is also possible to organize film screenings, play board games, arrange mini-festivals and similar activities. Important, that, at the same time, some physical venues have been preserved, and in some cases, new ones have appeared, where local organizations and initiatives can hold various events (seminars, meetings, etc.) in different cities with strict security measures.

“It turns out that in [city name], there was [name of the site] on [street name]. It works, people gather there, so we held a seminar there. There were 15 of us from the regions. Well, with all kinds of security measures, of course: we didn't tell them until the last minute where to go, on what floor, in what room. But still, there are such places, and people go there”.

There are groups of people united on the basis of common interests, hobbies, and ways of spending free time. Such groups continue their activities in at least several cities in different regions of Belarus. These groups have a certain structure, as well as platforms for regular communication on social networks. Interestingly, in some cases, such initiatives appeared after 2020.

“By the way, we also have a very active group called [named a group by type of activity]. ... They travel to different places, ... choose some historical points, both Soviet, of course, but also non-Soviet, you know, with Belarusian [national history] dates related to them, and so on. ... They have their own group ... where they are united, and this is also a certain formalization. They really have such a public initiative”.

5. Recruitment of new individuals which is based on shared values. This recruitment frequently occurs after educational events, programs, and other activities. At the same time, individuals expressing interest in civic activities often lack knowledge and understanding of the activists behind specific initiatives and events.

“It’s an achievement that we’ve engaged new individuals in this program I just mentioned. ... They, in principle, have no idea about public activity, public organizations, let alone civil society organizations. However, they share certain values with us, and we invite them”.

6. Supporting socially vulnerable groups and individuals, providing humanitarian aid, and offering consultations for various target groups, including socially vulnerable individuals and those who have experienced emigration due to political repression and war.

It’s important to note that some organizations, with teams and legal status focusing on assisting socially vulnerable groups, have endured in Belarus. They persist in regional cities and other towns, organizing diverse events for their target groups. However, while discussing them in a positive light, our interviewees raised the question of the extent to which these organizations can be deemed independent from state influence (are they not just GONGOs?).

7. Engaging in educational work, hosting popular science events, conducting educational programs, courses, and activities on politically neutral topics, as well as undertaking research initiatives.

“We can organize educational events on neutral topics, ones that don’t explore politics or pronounced civic activism—something more neutral”.

Educational activities for children were also highlighted.

8. Supportive activities for colleagues in the organization and the third sector in general. This includes counseling on safety issues, assistance with going abroad (if necessary), support in adapting to a new place (in case of relocation) and finding opportunities for psychological support.
9. Media activities, such as creating blogs and other media products, both at the level of regional centers from abroad and through microblogs inside Belarus.

Several interviews referred to the persistence at the local level of horizontal grassroots initiatives or groups that emerged in 2020 and are still advancing the protest agenda. Such groups, although infrequently, still carry out protest actions. For example, they take pictures with the national flag and share them on social media, organize similar events, assist, and symbolically support political prisoners. Additionally, they engage in counterpropaganda and other similar activities. The activities of these initiatives are rather discreet and non-public in nature.

An important aspect that was addressed in several interviews was the demand of people in the regions for public activities. According to our interlocutors, people inside the country are ready and willing to gather, socialize, and engage in activities that would potentially not endanger their personal safety. This phenomenon of civic interest and readiness for action is not directly related to the activities of civil society organizations and initiatives, but it is crucial for understanding that in Belarus, and among Belarusians, there is still a demand for association, collective actions, and solidarity.

At the same time, it was noted that when carrying out any activity inside Belarus, activists anticipate detentions and other types of repressions. Additionally, they face challenges in disseminating information about their activities, announcing, and promoting their events.

“It’s all risky, any activity. ...You know, they can pick on anything, even if we just came together, for example, to draw. They can still pick on us and say that we’re doing something obscure, you know...”

“... In the past, we used to do an event, we put it all on the Internet, we talked about it, we invited people. It was all transparent. Now we can’t even say ‘girls, let’s come and paint’ or ‘girls, let’s have this [type of activity] today’; we can’t even do that... So, we can’t do anything openly at all”.

Achievements

According to representatives of CSOs at the local level, their main achievement is the very survival and continued existence of their organizations/initiatives. As well as that they can still carry out their work, organize local events in Belarus, and occasionally gather together despite the fact that their team members being in different countries.

“At this stage, what’s important for us is that we are still working, holding events, gathering people, and doing something together in our region. So, the fact that we are alive and active is already a great result for us at this stage”.

“As for successes, I don’t know... We sometimes joke that our success is that our team is still a team, that we didn’t jump out the window...”

At the same time, there was a particular emphasis on the pride derived from being active under maximum state pressure, dealing with fatigue, and coping with burnout condition of many activists.

“And we’re proud of the fact that we’re not stopping because I’ve come to understand a little bit about the tactics of the state, which discourages people from pursuing justice, legality, decency. And that’s what people do: they come, they see a hopeless case, they put their hands down and leave...”

Sustaining the team and ongoing activities represents not only an accomplishment but also the ability to address the needs of the organizations’ target groups, executing projects and initiatives for the people within the country. We can consider as an achievement that organizations are able to provide people with exclusive services that would not be available at all if these organizations did not exist.

The interviewees consider organizing of any group activities and events inside the country as an achievement, as this creates a space for communication and the discussion of problems and issues that concern them and their target audiences. According to our interlocutors, they have practically no other opportunities to unite and communicate.

“So, the accomplishment of all the other guys who are still doing something in [city name] or in Belarus is that they are doing something. Even if it’s neutral and grassroots, it’s super. And they bring people together, and they give people a chance to be in a safe environment, to talk about something they care about”.

“[Our main achievement] is about 12 offline events on different topics, like I said. They’re all small, but they are conducted offline. ... I think it’s very important”.

Unfortunately, however, it is often the case that the team may receive threats or be subjected to pressure from the authorities after holding events in Belarus, and security risks may increase for them.

Some interviewees mentioned successfully completed projects to improve the territory or solve other local problems as achievements. In a broader sense, it can be described as an achievement that people are still involved in the local agenda, discuss, monitor the situation, and look for ways to solve existing problems.

“They, by removing some problems, by monitoring whether they were solved or not, they made an impact in that way and they saw for themselves that they made an impact, because we also got feedback from people afterwards: ‘Wow, it worked. Yeah, it helped’”.

“We’ve helped (we’re just not voicing it right now) to solve, if we take 2022 and 2023..., about 15 local problems. They are small, not regional, local. About 15 local problems were solved in favor of these people with our direct or indirect participation, which benefited, I counted, about 100 thousand people who can use these services”.

Local organizations perceive the resolution of urban problems as the implementation of inclusive practices, engaging local residents in addressing matters significant to them. When evaluating the practices of local activism in tackling daily concerns, our interviewees said that they were surprised and admired by the people who are not afraid to be so active in repressive environment of Belarus.

“But they are also doing all this, solving local problems. In general, people there are quite frank in their comments - they share the situation, their opinion, that is, in principle, you see, in some regions, it works”.

“... But in doing so, you see how people don’t seem to be stressed out about it. I don’t know how it is, all these people amaze me... I mean, if I were them, I’d sit there and keep my head down, because I read independent media, but they probably don’t...”

They also mentioned achievements in terms of attracting new people to organizations after their participation in events. In some cases, there were reports of a greater number of people attending educational events and programs organized by local organizations, which is considered an undeniable success. This includes the fact that some regional activists successfully expand their social networks and increase the number of followers.

Another achievement is the preservation of grassroots activism, particularly in the case of horizontal network initiatives that appeared in 2020, although their activities are now limited. However, such initiatives were mentioned only in a few of our interviews.

In summary, it can be observed that despite persistent repression, some local-level organizations in Belarus successfully maintain and sustain various activities, showcasing certain achievements. These endeavors involve a relatively small number of individuals and are primarily focused on addressing communal issues, fostering community bonds, and ensuring the resilience and support of the organizations and their members.

IV. EVALUATING THE STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY, ORGANIZATIONS, AND VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THEIR ACTIVITIES. CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES

The condition of civil society: crisis? Survival? Standing by?

As in previous issues of monitoring, we asked interviewees to evaluate and describe the state of Belarusian civil society, as well as the condition of their own organizations and initiatives. Responses to this question varied significantly in content and emotional tone, ranging from extreme pessimism to conditional optimism.

In terms of more negative and emotionally upsetting assessments, some mentioned that their organizations have not survived the crisis and have effectively ceased to exist. Currently, their focus is more on their own physical self-preservation, with the aim of continuing, or potentially being able to continue, some socially beneficial activities in the future. At the same time, interviewees who believe that their organizations have not endured the crisis can continue their activities on an individual level, functioning as experts, trainers, teachers, etc. Individuals affiliated with these “non-surviving organizations” and relocated abroad can persist in their activities within other relocated Belarusian CSOs. However, unlike the situation before 2020, when individuals from the public sector, particularly in education, health care, and social protection, collaborated with civil society organizations, most have now opted to refrain from such cooperation due to security concerns.

“I wouldn’t even say survival. It’s not about survival as an organization, it’s about personal survival. What we want, if we don’t have an organization, if we don’t have connections. The only thing we’ll have left is our own initiative, and that’s the only thing that can hold something together”.

“We are no longer in a state of survival, we already have not survived... And on the other hand, the personal survival of the organization’s members themselves is a big question, because many of us are now in different countries. And in order to survive physically, someone has reoriented to other areas of work to survive and make money, someone has stayed in our field, but they work either for other organizations, or they think about ways, having our experience [how to use it], someone has gone into research stuff. Well, yeah, that’s probably pretty much everybody. It is probably a reorientation of our experience to other spheres...”

They also mentioned attempts, if not to overcome, then to maintain themselves in a situation and state of constant fear.

“I think, yes, [we are] fully [in a state of] survival, underground existence, crisis. Something like that we feel, including fear”.

An essential aspect of this self-preservation involves the development of one’s own individual potential, as well as, whenever possible, the preservation or even building of new social ties, attracting new like-minded people to one’s activities.

“We don’t have the means to do anything. So, we only live ...to be together, and if possible, we expand [the circle of] our like-minded women, ...try to do something...”

In the middle of the emotional spectrum of responses there are statements that both civil society and people working in CSOs are still in a state of survival. In this case, activists continue their activities but talk a lot about a difficult psychological state, burnout, anxiety, and fatigue from the repressive background. In parallel, they constantly return to the theme of security and (self-)limitations and self-censorship of their activities. Also, among those who continue to work inside Belarus, there is a widespread opinion that even if they have faced relatively small, limited repressive pressure so far, they still potentially expect to face more persecution in the future.

“We are also somewhere in this state [of survival] because, despite the fact that we are doing something there, every time you check your activity through the prism of safety, you limit yourself both with forms and topics. Yes, of course, it’s survival, it’s not just a happy life and long-term planning... And we recently assessed the mental state of our colleagues... And it’s very, very critical: ...chronic fatigue, burnout, depression, antidepressants, there are suicidal thoughts... And so, yes, the words about survival - it’s a question of how much strength you have left because there is such total fatigue and a constant threat”.

In discussions about survival, the topic of confronting adaptation challenges for employees of organizations who have left the country to work from exile was also noteworthy. This circumstance predictably leads to a large number of problems and generates a feeling of uncertainty in people about surviving abroad. This psychological aspect is also complicated by the fact that in Belarus, some of these people owned property, some worked at several jobs, which gave them a sense of material security, a sense that disappeared after their organizations were repressed, and they themselves faced persecution and pressure.

“Overcoming challenges that weren’t there before. Conditionally speaking, ... what we are mainly engaged in, even before 2020, was quite difficult. But since everyone was in Belarus and at least some everyday aspects were settled (in particular, people had homes, people had a more or less defined sphere of activity, an outlined future), now, of course, it is impossible to think in such categories”.

In evaluating the overall condition of civil society, the assertion that repressions have fundamentally changed its nature, composition, and both physical and virtual spaces of activities is noteworthy. In this regard, people in Belarus who would like and are potentially ready to engage in some forms of public activity often do not know where to find information about opportunities or whom to address with such a request.

“The landscape [of civil society] has been completely destroyed... that is, it’s kind of hanging in the air... There are no organizations that officially [work], where you used to be able to come. Plus, they’ve also hit the networks. So, you can’t be subscribed to any [social media pages]”.

Another important characteristic of the state of civil society is the claim of its “invisibility”, where some organizations, especially those with leaders abroad, assert that they have already navigated the state of crisis and can carry out certain activities. However, these activities have, firstly, become smaller in scale. Secondly, they have become “invisible”. In other words, even

those organizations that are willing to state that they have survived the crisis cannot, for security reasons, publicly disclose and discuss their actions. This precaution is taken to ensure the continuation of their activities within the country, avoiding providing authorities with information that could be used as a basis for repression.

“I think it [the state of civil society] is difficult. I mean, I can’t say that it’s already a state of crisis, because everyone is kind of used to the way we work now, what opportunities there are... It’s a difficult state in terms of ... that you become, your activity is so super invisible”.

Among the more optimistic aspects in assessing the state of civil society and their own activities, interviewees mentioned that against the background of constant repression, their teams have become more united and stronger. The situation with trust, support, and care for each other has improved. The teams have established internal processes and policies, which were previously lacking due to active work and limited resources. Some interviewees noted that civil society and organizations are undergoing adaptation, and there is a certain reformatting of civil society.

“It’s as if, for example, our team has become stronger over this period of time. First of all, we learned how to and work online... Then the second thing, ...we also started to reorganize our activities, we started to think more about safety... We grew more. For example, we started to think differently about how we can make better decisions... Because previously there was such a focus on activity, ...and now it’s more like: let’s think about the structure, how we make decisions, what we want...”

“... Now the task is to keep whatever is possible alive, to try to adapt what is being done, to reshape it, to do something in Belarus, from outside Belarus for Belarusians, something abroad for those Belarusians who left Belarus. Well, this is such a period now of ... of reformatting”.

Also, similar to the findings in previous studies, our interlocutors stated that their current activity can be characterized as underground. However, as a relatively positive aspect, it can be noted that, even while operating underground, Belarusian civil society is accumulating potential for future changes and the possibility of positive and open actions.

“It feels like we’ve already navigated through the crisis; survival is still crucial, but I’d describe it as a super underground, with secrecy and a sense of anticipation... I wouldn’t say we’ve simply vanished, as if civil society has come to an end. It’s still there, but it’s in a state of maturation, hiding and evolving... It’s a waiting game, not just survival at this point”.

Is there an alternative to repressed organizations locally?

During the study, we examined the hypothesis that the repression of organized civil society has resulted in a deficiency of services and/or activities for the local population. Pro-governmental organizations (GONGOs) and government agencies themselves may attempt to fill this void by offering alternative services. Additionally, we aimed to determine whether any new non-state

initiatives and activists are emerging on the local level that could theoretically occupy this vacant space.

When discussing the situation in their cities and regions, interviewees expressed that the repressions essentially “cleared out” the space within them. Most of the organizations that existed before 2020 were liquidated, and many activists either ended up in prison or left. Those who held this perspective argued that a sort of vacuum remained in the place of the previously existing civil society sector. In other words, the “old” civil society organizations were destroyed, and no new entities emerged to take their place. Additionally, it was noted that the state cannot or does not want to fill the resulting empty space. However, in some cases, GONGOs may initiate similar activities. Still, they are not genuinely motivated to engage in this kind of activity, as it is seen as an assignment “from above” rather than their own initiative. The interviewees also pointed out that GONGOs could be used for propaganda purposes, particularly for ideological attacks on individuals disloyal to the authorities.

“...Compensated? I don’t think so. I do not see any adequate proposals from government agencies or GONGOs. In other words, those public organizations that stopped working, their activities were not, in essence, taken up by [GONGOs]”.

“There are no new ‘our’, normal [CSOs or grassroots initiatives] appearing. Of course, maybe there are some others who have nothing to do with us, with our entire normal community...”

“And on top of everything, all sorts of chapters of the Belaya Rus’ party are emerging. Various chapters of the ‘wonderful’ Belarusian Union of Women are becoming more active there. In terms of information, of course, this has become much more... We see that in the regional press and in state Telegram channels there is an active glorification of these organizations, including with the help of hate speech”.

However, other assessments of civil society on the ground were also voiced, especially in relation to organizations that work in the social sphere. On the one hand, interviewees said that not all such organizations were closed, or, for example, only some structural divisions of an organization were shut down. In these cases, the organizations that retained registration, in some instances, took a position of subordination to the authorities, unquestioningly complying with their demands on redundant reporting and other issues. As a result, co-optation occurs, leading to the absorption of such social organizations by the state.

“There are organizations that continue to work in Belarus... They continue to work officially, officially receive grants, register them, and there is a completely different level there. But, roughly speaking, these are organizations subordinated to the state. They are now not doing work for the target group, I would say, but they are dealing with solving some, you know, technical problems for the state”.

In the case of activists and organizations that remain and continue to work in Belarus, officials are also trying to literally force them to provide some kind of services, although it is unclear on what grounds and with what funding. For example, they propose creating some kind of

platforms, projects, without offering any support or even assuming that organizations will invest some of their own funds in them.

“I come to the executive committee, and they ask me: ‘Make a room, put up beds, pay for the room’. I say: ‘And with what funds?’ - ‘Well, you are a public organization’”.

Cases of social organizations working with certain target groups and issues were also mentioned when the state tries to create some replacements and alternatives for them. However, in some cases, this activity not only does not help people but, on the contrary, can harm them. As an example of such a development of events, a situation was cited when government agencies in one of the regions tried to work with the problem of domestic violence but at the same time created methodological manuals. Following these manuals could lead not to a solution but to an aggravation of the situation for people going through this traumatic experience. To some extent, this situation can be mitigated by previously trained employees from the public sector (with the assistance of CSOs) if they remained in their jobs after the onset of the political crisis. However, in general, a formal approach or the imitation by government agencies of some activities that were previously implemented by CSOs pose a potential threat to people who are left without help in difficult life situations.

“There are not enough methodological and some other materials, and now they are starting to develop them for this... When you look at these materials, you become scared because... things that are so crazy, one might say, in terms of content... in these products. When we really understand that people who understand this topic are not working on these products now, it becomes scary and offensive... It turns out that the entire original idea is completely emasculated; it again becomes some kind of picture, from the point of view of existence. But in terms of content, these are practices that do not provide a service but, on the contrary, worsen the situation”.

Moreover, in cases where government officials or GONGOs try to borrow and repeat some projects and ideas that CSOs previously did, then, according to interviewees, they do not have adequate ideas about what and why they are doing. People implementing some kind of initiative, on the one hand, can show a certain enthusiasm. On the other hand, they do not understand either how non-profit projects work or how they can be financed.

“Here we have the Women’s Union... They spied on everything we and our organizations once carried out—how we did it, how others did it. Everything is about the same, only with a different sauce [they make it themselves now]”.

Interesting that, according to the stories of interviewees, despite state repression against public organizations, local officials can still, in some cases, provide people who approach them with contacts of organizations that have previously worked on this topic. There are cases when information (with contacts) about organizations that have already been liquidated is even stored on the websites of executive committees.

However, instances were also mentioned where local officials, instead of addressing the problems of socially vulnerable groups, simply reported the absence of problems. They created

the appearance that all social problems had already been solved, and no work in this direction was needed. Additionally, people do not trust government agencies and are not always ready to approach them in crisis situations, realizing that this may not protect their personal data and ensure the anonymity of their requests.

“People don’t have trust, and especially in these centers that leak information, where there are some punitive methods. When you need to leave your personal information and go with your passport, people don’t apply”.

The closed by authorities CSOs themselves mention that they are attempting to persist in working with their target audiences, particularly the socially vulnerable. However, the shift to online service delivery, either due to security concerns or the physical absence of organization members who are abroad, has resulted in adverse consequences. Target groups either do not receive the required assistance in the manner and extent they need, or they receive it in a limited capacity.

It is crucial to note that, in discussions about whether repressed CSOs are being replaced by alternatives, many interviewees argued that people in the regions still express a demand for social activities, communal gatherings, and various projects. However, it was emphasized that even physical spaces (coworking spaces, cafes, hubs, etc.) where people could gather in their cities are much fewer than before.

“In general, ... city residents feel the need to interact and attend some events and discussions, or at least listen to something. There is a need, it seems to me. Previously there were more opportunities and maybe less activity from people, but now people are very active”.

Several times in the interviews, it was highlighted that new horizontal grassroots initiatives are emerging in some Belarusian cities. Typically, these initiatives are related to cultural activities and spending free time together. Interestingly, interviewees pointed out that sometimes these new initiatives adopt names that previously belonged to liquidated organizations. Young people often take the lead in such initiatives.

It can be assumed that individuals initiating new initiatives have either not directly experienced repression or assess security risks differently than activists who have long worked in the third sector. Additionally, it was emphasized that newly emerging initiatives try not to publicize their activities to avoid potential pressure. At the same time, it is noteworthy that activists who have relocated abroad expressed their readiness to support these new local initiatives by sharing their experience or providing assistance in other ways.

“There are some young people who are trying to do something... They even wrote a business plan to open such a place. Totally amazing. They are Belarusian-speaking, they have corresponding values, and they want to call this place [name of the site], as if they had never heard about repressions... The logic of such people who continue to engage in activism might be that they probably cannot do otherwise, or they think that it doesn’t concern them, or it’s safe, or for some other reason, or they don’t understand the risks. And perhaps, thank God,

they don't understand. Because a person who has thought through all the risks in advance will not go to the square, and will not speak out anywhere once again..."

In addition, it can be observed that these initiatives are not much aware of each other's activities. There was a situation when one of two individuals from one region mentioned that new initiatives were emerging in the regional center, while the other argued that nothing new was appearing. There was also a situation where representatives of two organizations from the same city knew little about each other's activities.

"Oddly enough, yes, some initiatives are emerging. In [name of a regional center], two very good initiatives have appeared - [names]. However, it's important to consider that we may not be aware of some organizations due to the fact that if they emerge, they will likely remain non-public. In other words, there will simply be a group of citizens known among themselves, known for helping others".

To summarize, in practice, the state, either independently or through GONGOs, is unable to replace the previously existing CSOs with their projects, services, and activities or create high-quality alternatives. Through the repression and closure of civil society organizations, the state has left Belarusians in a sort of social vacuum, lacking opportunities in social, cultural, civil-political, educational, and other additional domains. However, there remains a local-level demand for joint activities, and there are occasional instances of new grassroots initiatives emerging in cities.

Civil society organizations' and initiatives' agenda

During the study, we inquired about the current agenda that organizations are addressing and the extent to which this agenda is influenced by their location (city and regions where they are based). Generally, our interviewees conveyed that this factor does not significantly impact the priorities and directions of their organizations' functioning. It can be also stated that almost all local civil society organizations and initiatives engage in activities related to resolving local issues.

As a distinctive aspect of the agenda for local organizations, one of our interviewees highlighted that people in the regions are more preoccupied with issues directly affecting them, as opposed to those linked to high political or even geopolitical levels.

"I'd say the regions generally deal with the same problems. Each city might have its local specifics, but overall, they differ from the issues in Minsk, in my opinion. These problems mostly revolve around grassroots matters, not political choices or the future direction—whether we align with Russia or the European Union, for instance. People are more concerned about everyday, practical things".

Meanwhile, one of the interviewees highlighted that with the transition of CSOs and civil society activities to an online format in many cases, the agenda related to microregions, and specific

local issues has nearly vanished. Consequently, an increasing number of (online) activities are shifting to the national level.

“In a sense, microregions are fading away because there are fewer of those people - those activists willing to take a proactive stance, and there’s a decline in media presence. And we’re once again heading toward an ‘online national’ level, where we try to convey our opinions directly through online channels”.

They also stressed that, given the elevated security risks and repression, organizations operating on the local level tend to adopt a neutral agenda. This involves addressing only those topics and issues deemed unlikely to pose potential security risks for participants.

“I believe that presently, as avid herbivores, our agenda remains simple: just take action. We’ve decided for ourselves that, while we may not be able to openly express our political views or engage in teaching debates, we can contribute to what we can. This, we find, is sufficient for people. We approach everything in an herbivorous manner. And that’s enough because those who join us see it, appreciate it, and we thank them, fulfilling their need for community and a secure space. Our current focus is on building a community and providing a safe place for expressing thoughts”.

At the same time, several interviewees revealed an emotional assessment suggesting that organizations operating at the local level might face criticism from colleagues in the sector for engaging in projects and topics perceived as lacking substantial civic and/or political significance and meaning. Despite this, they defended such an agenda, highlighting its importance for residents in urban areas and its potential to unite people in pursuing common interests. Furthermore, they view engaging with such an agenda as a way for organizations abroad to maintain connections with people in the country.

“I really think it’s worth doing exactly what we’re doing now because it’s very close and understandable to people. Everyone is discussing isolation of certain structures that have left somewhere and have detached from real life. Well, this is about the actual life people live every day, where they can’t navigate with a stroller because there are no ramps. I understand that some may dismiss it as ‘petty matters’, as they wrote about us. So, they’ve essentially created that term for small topics”.

“Yeah, they label these as ‘minor topics’, almost like nonsense. And maybe it’s not the kind of thing you’d throw out at any public forum. Tricky to present somehow. But you know what? It’s what kept us connected to people, stayed relevant to their lives, dealt with their problems. And that means a whole lot to them. People got it - finally, someone’s talking about our problems, our life. ‘Cause, truth be told, there’s no one else out there addressing these issues. I figure it’s worth sticking to, and honestly, I don’t see much of this happening in the regions these days”.

Moreover, one interview highlighted that in cases when organizations retained their registration, there exists not only a risk but also concrete evidence pointing to a certain conflict in the value and content of their activities. This is because the actions of these organizations,

conducted in collaboration with government agencies, are more aligned with local officials' perspectives on civic activity, its goals, objectives, and content than with a direct focus on public interest.

"I can't say I don't notice any particular specifics. The only thing is that those who continue working in the region have become somewhat 'smooth', in line with the official agenda. Even when I look at our own primary organizations, I see how they continue engaging [with the authorities] to pursue their agenda, services, and so on. But it doesn't quite match the value message that is articulated, for example, within the local NGO community".

Evaluating the reach of target groups

Most interviewees mentioned difficulties reaching target groups of their organizations, activities and projects. This problem is closely interconnected with the overall repressive atmosphere, very limited chances for offline events, fewer activists in regions due to arrests or leaving the country, and challenges faced by independent media. The independent media themselves often face repression, being labeled as 'extremist formations', and their websites are blocked in Belarus.

It is understandable that organizations conducting online events encounter fewer issues with accessing target audiences, particularly when they allocate extra resources for targeted promotion on social networks. However, in this scenario, interviewees mentioned that they had to avoid disseminating information through channels other than their own.

"We've completely ditched any third-party intermediaries in information distribution. We've got our own information channel, and that's pretty much it - we don't really use anything else. Meanwhile, we've strengthened our communication and don't face any issues connecting with the audience".

"When it comes to online, we have no problem with this because the advertisement goes through social networks, through our contacts, who are also not recognized as extremists, and we manage to reach them. If we want to get some kind of feedback, conduct research, invite people to some online courses, then get to know them offline, then there are no problems with this because the advertisement penetrates, and people read it. The problem sometimes is that if we wanted to work offline..."

Predictably, organizations with a long history in a specific field and a broad network of their own alumni encounter fewer issues in reaching their target audiences. This advantage assists them in sustaining participation levels for the events they organize.

"When it comes to working on [name of the project], it's easier because there are many people familiar with us. We are confident that we can gather the right number of participants even without an extensive information campaign".

The challenges with accessing target audiences intensify, especially when regional organizations with local staff host events in Belarus. In such cases, organizations naturally

hesitate to share event information via public channels due to safety concerns. Recruitment to the offline events primarily relies on personal contacts and connections, expectedly limiting the number of participants. Striking a balance between maintaining offline activities and ensuring the safety of organizers and participants proves to be exceedingly challenging. And if there are even minimal risks, offline events are most probably canceled. Consequently, information about planned events is primarily shared among trusted individuals who are somehow verified by the organizers. This results in a significant decrease in the number of events' attendees but are also aware of the events organized by a particular civil society organization or initiative.

“We can’t make public announcements about ourselves. It’s not possible to share on our Facebook page, for instance, that we have a specific program. In other words, reaching a broad audience is not feasible...”

As a partial solution to the challenge of reaching target audiences, activists create new groups of individuals categorized as “safe” and share information about their activities and events within these groups. Nonetheless, many interviewees mentioned a substantial decrease (for example, fivefold) in the number of people able to attend their events.

Another approach to address the challenge of decreasing access to the target audience is when new volunteers join a regional organization in Belarus. This influx builds more trust in the ongoing activities. However, it’s important to note that the arrival of new individuals into the organization is more of an exception than a regular occurrence.

“Over time, due to the fact that finally new volunteers ‘on the ground’ have emerged (well, not emerged, but rather have been added), including from different age categories, then this access [to the target audience] has become a little easier. It has returned to normal, so to speak, a little”.

At the same time, at least two ongoing systemic issues with accessing the target audience in Belarusian cities and regions were highlighted, persisting from before 2020 to the present day. Firstly, organizations have consistently faced more complex and problematic access to people in the regions compared to Minsk. Secondly, the existing channels for disseminating information about proposed programs, projects, and events typically prioritize the capital over the regions. According to one of the interviewees, these problems remain unresolved.

Overall, organizations that persist in working at the local level can still carry out offline activities in various cities across Belarus. However, the number of participants of such events is notably limited, signifying an extremely challenging access to target groups for these organizations and initiatives.

Planning their own activities by organizations and initiatives

Most organizations that act on the local level and that are surveyed plan their activities and recognize the significance of well-defined strategies for successful functioning. Some have both

strategic and operational plans, along with project indicators guiding their activities. However, when the organization, including its management, is situated in Belarus, and the majority of activities occur within the country and offline, planning horizons tend to shrink or vanish entirely. In such instances, organizations operate within the existing conditions, relying on provisional planning for just a few months.

“As for Belarus, we live day by day because we don’t know when we might have to shut down or what could happen”.

“In terms of what’s realistically in place and happening, that’s about a month, and as for everything else, there are plans, but we ourselves don’t have much confidence in them”.

Situation with funding

As part of the interviews, we inquired about the funding sources and duration for regional organizations’ activities. Typically, organizations secure financial support for a maximum period of a year or a year and a half, with some cases revealing funding spans as short as just a few months.

All funded organizations operate on a project basis. Only one organization generates income by functioning as a commercial enterprise in Belarus. However, these earnings are minimal and serve more as a formalization of activities in Belarus than a substantial income source. Some interviewees mentioned considering crowdfunding in future, but these plans have not been put into action yet.

Organizations with leaders still in Belarus and/or without relocated staff, face the most challenging financial situations. In these cases, they cited a fundamental lack of funding, often relying on continued activities through volunteer efforts. For organizations where at least one member has relocated abroad, there’s typically more success in securing funding for initiatives and supporting those working within the country. Activists who have left Belarus and hold additional jobs feel somewhat more financially secure. They mentioned being willing to continue their organizational work even without payment (if needed), though this might impact the extent and outcomes of their activities negatively.

Overall, the financial landscape for local organizations and their activists, both inside and outside Belarus, is marked by instability and challenges.

Challenges faced by local organizations and initiatives in Belarus

“I believe the key [is] that the activities have simply become invisible”.

From an interview

Local organizations in Belarus face a multitude of challenges in their activities. It’s important to note that, alongside specific issues related to repression, many difficulties are shared

regardless of the city or region of operation. The problems identified in interviews can be categorized into several groups:

1. Challenges in a repressive environment. This category encompasses various risks related to the safety of activists physically present in Belarus and those who have left but are concerned about the well-being of their relatives, families, colleagues, and target audiences within Belarus. Interviewees also highlighted the heightened anxiety experienced by their employees when organizing offline events in Belarus, fearing potential repercussions for attendees in the aftermath.

“We do have a significant fear: we are afraid of causing harm to those who stayed... We are struggling to find the optimal format to publicly talk about ourselves... so we don’t cause harm to anyone”.

In addition, it is crucial to highlight the enduring and, at times, escalating state of ‘legal default’, where formal or even common ‘rules of the game’ no longer hold sway within the country. The existing regulations are subject to voluntary alterations based on the authorities’ perception of political expediency.

“Lack of security. On one hand, I want to say [there are no] clear rules of the game or any framework, but on the other hand, it seems like we know these frameworks. However, the laws are not respected. Even if you register some organization, it’s not a guarantee that you can work with it without issues”.

Simultaneously, in certain sectors, such as education, the Belarusian state imposes intricate regulations that pose significant challenges for CSOs, hindering their activities even in the absence of security concerns.

“Over the past six months to a year, numerous new formal obstacles to the implementation of any non-formal educational work have arisen. This includes the introduction of legislative acts, regulations, etc., imposing restrictions on work or formalizing educational services”.

Furthermore, elevated security risks give rise to a self-censoring phenomenon, where organizations choose not to include people from Belarus in their programs or assign them roles in their projects. It is crucial to emphasize that, in the first case, the difficulty in including participants may also arise from the organizations’ challenges in helping them obtain visas for international travel.

“In Belarus, people are often excluded from some educational programs either because they are not accepted or are admitted on the condition that they secure their own visa. But few people are familiar with the process and can navigate it quickly... Job postings often specify that candidates, Belarusians, must be in exile, so, it results in the exclusion of people inside Belarus. For security reasons, they are not even considered”.

A significant risk for organizations involves the potential inclusion by Belarusian authorities in the list of extremist groups, or the labelling their information platforms as extremist materials.

In such cases, organizations not only experience a decline in their reach and audience but also face an elevated risk of participants in their events being subjected to arrests.

2. The issue of invisibility and lack of public disclosure. Arguably, this can be considered the central theme in responses to the question of the key challenges faced by Belarusian organizations operating at the local level.

This issue has several dimensions. Firstly, due to security risks, organizations rarely publicize or seek to share information about their activities, projects, successes, and achievements. Secondly, since organizations within the sector are unaware of each other's projects and plans, it leads to a situation where, in the face of limited resources, they compete for funding on similar (or identical) projects. Thirdly, there are very few closed, non-public platforms where organizations can exchange information about their activities and plans with both donors and each other. Criticism has also been directed at the approach of inviting Belarusian organizations to even the few existing events based on unclear criteria and grounds. As a result, an atmosphere of inequality and unhealthy competition emerges within the sector.

“There are very few of these [events], even outside of [donor] conferences, that would provide an opportunity to draw some conclusions, to see who is doing what. It’s just that now, I know, there is practically one [event name] that can boast of this... And it doesn’t always attract the appropriate number of people. And there weren’t many of those who could have been there... And it seems to me that there were more opportunities before when different people would say: ‘Oh, we are implementing a cool project, join us...’. And now it seems to me that in this area, when someone receives funding, it somehow happens as completely unnoticeably as possible, and you don’t even know what’s going on there, in your sector”.

As a result of organizations being unaware of each other's activities and a decline in trust, opportunities for collaborative efforts may diminish. This leads to fragmentation and the formation of small circles (bubbles) of conditional trust, where individuals from the same organizations and initiatives primarily communicate with each other. Additionally, there is an increased risk that the most communicative (though not necessarily the most functional) of these networks symbolically occupies the space, speaking on behalf of the entire sector and having better chances of receiving support.

Furthermore, at the organizational level, the lack of publicity poses a risk to their sustainability in engaging with target groups. Due to security concerns, organizations and initiatives close themselves off from their audiences and, over time, may entirely lose access to them.

“What hinders our activity the most is this secrecy, our anonymity, and the fact that we isolate ourselves. ...This is very frustrating because it feels like we’re doing something for people while, at the same time, pushing them away. It’s like we’re testing them, ... closing ourselves off from the audience with whom it would be crucial and necessary to talk and work. Either we’re all in, or there’s a bit of skepticism. But with that audience that remains closed to us, with whom we can’t talk and explain that ‘well, guys, the world is not so black and white’, we can’t reach them. Even if we see these people, we don’t allow them to approach us, based on safety”.

3. Inadequate or entirely absent donors' support for organizations within Belarus.

Some local activists operating within the country have reported receiving virtually no assistance following the events of 2020. They continue to engage with their target audiences, either in minimal capacities or find themselves in situations where they may have to cease their activities altogether.

“And after 2020, all that external funding - it’s all gone. What the organization was initially meant for - to officially work, receive funding from outside, and address local problems - that no longer exists in any case”.

4. Peculiarities of donors' support.

It is important to specifically highlight issues related to the poor psychological well-being of organization staff. Concerns about the psychological condition of their employees have been voiced multiple times in interviews (particularly by organizational leaders). It was noted that this problem often either goes unnoticed or lacks the necessary understanding from donors.

“ The issue of mental health is relevant in our team. Donors seem to believe that if you have spent a year abroad, you are considered healthy. We requested assistance for this, but this time, all those budget lines related to mental health were crossed out for us”.

Interviewees also raised concerns about the challenges related to urgent and swift assistance when needed for the current needs and requirements of organizations. For instance, if immediate psychological support is required, and obtaining donor approval takes a prolonged period, the issue may worsen to the point where the previously requested assistance may no longer be relevant.

The issue of remuneration is equally crucial for individuals working in CSOs. Activists operating at the local level, who have left the country and now work abroad, face significant risks to their financial well-being. Adapting to a new environment can be challenging. It is important to note that individuals from regions often faced financial challenges even before their forced departure. Hence, relocating to a more expensive country implies even greater financial risks for them.

“If there is simply some kind of regional, separate organization, it will, as one might sense, find it much more challenging to resolve its everyday issues. Naturally, if you don't address everyday concerns such as what to eat, where to live, and where to sleep, it becomes more difficult to carry out your activities”.

Another challenge is the lack of support for strategic planning, as mentioned in some interviews. This includes organizing team meetings when team members are located in different countries.

“It’s impossible to carry out any joint strategic planning because part of the team cannot enter Belarus, and gathering everyone [somewhere else] requires resources and finances. It seems like there are now fewer opportunities for conducting this planning, and we haven’t found anything in almost six months of searching”.

5. Challenges arising from discrepancies between the operational capabilities within Belarus and the project reporting requirements imposed.

Like past assessments of the state of Belarusian civil society, interviewees emphasized the significant challenges, and occasionally impossibility, of adhering to the reporting requirements imposed by donors for projects implemented inside Belarus. Specifically, providing receipts and written expenditure confirmations for project activities carried out within the country becomes unfeasible due to security risks.

“It’s very difficult to write reports... Many people refuse to provide receipts, for example, if these are some sites in [name of city]... You constantly have to write explanatory notes and reports explaining why you can’t obtain a receipt for the venue. And the owner of the venue went through detention, and he refuses not only to write a receipt but even refuses to decipher his initials”.

One of the negative consequences of such reporting requirements and the inability to meet them is the situation where activists inside Belarus experience burnout and lose the motivation to engage in activities within the country. Alternatively, if part of the team is located abroad, they may decide to redirect their efforts to focus exclusively on events and/or audiences outside the country.

Addressing specific problems related to the nuances of project support, challenges include, firstly, the difficulty in finding international partners when project conditions require collaboration between Belarusian and foreign organizations. Activists found it unclear where to seek assistance and guidance in identifying such partners. Suggestions were made that, when donors formulate such requirements, it would be beneficial for organizations to receive guidance on potential foreign partners.

Secondly, among the separately mentioned issues, there was a lack of experts available to participate in activities inside the country. Previously, some organizations practiced hosting meetings and consultations on issues relevant to people in their cities. However, such experts and specialists are often physically absent from the country or are in places of detention.

“Now there are a lot of those people whom we invited back then - ... the same attorneys, lawyers, but they are not there now. Someone left, someone was deprived of their license, someone was imprisoned. It’s a significant problem now to find an expert who wouldn’t be afraid, who would come, even though there’s nothing bad here, just to talk to people”.

Thus, Belarusian civil society organizations and initiatives operating at the local level continue to deal with numerous risks, primarily in the realm of security. However, while the repressive backdrop remains a constant topic of discussion post-2020, the primary issue highlighted in interviews for this study revolves around the theme of invisibility and the closed nature of organizational activities, accompanied by the associated challenges.

VI. SECTORAL AND INTER-SECTORAL INTERACTION AND COOPERATION

In the research, we also asked questions regarding evaluation of sectoral and inter-sectoral interaction within the Belarusian civil society.

Intra-sectoral interaction with other organizations within an own city/region, at national and international levels

Based on the interview analysis, it can be concluded that intra-sectoral collaboration and interaction among organizations in cities, regions, and at the national level occur at three primary levels: 1) shared values and interests, 2) personal connections, and 3) umbrella organizations.

Activists who have been working in the third sector for an extended period typically know each other quite well, both at the local and national levels. The primary mode of contact, as mentioned by almost everyone, is interaction based on personal connections, involving discussions and the exchange of information. It is natural that individuals who are in the same city, region, or work in organizations with similar themes and shared values have a better knowledge and understanding of each other. Activists who remain in Belarus are understandably more cautious and selective in their contacts than their colleagues who have left the country. However, only in few cases we receive responses regarding institutional cooperation between organizations and the joint implementation of projects, rather than just personal communication among people from different CSOs who have known each other for a long time.

“There is [interaction] with some, mostly within the framework of the projects that we do. ... We had a project there, collaborating with people from [city name], until they started to face significant pressure, as people in [city name] were generally intimidated. They had to abandon this program, and only [name of city] remained. Some interactions currently take place at the level of information exchange. There is no talk of joint projects or anything like that yet”.

Cooperation with civil society organizations in other countries occurs only in specific cases. Typically, it is an extension of existing relationships or projects that organizations had undertaken previously. More often, organizations cited partnerships with entities from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, Poland, and Lithuania. Only in one interview they mentioned a new direction in international cooperation, emerging after 2020. However, interviewees noted that the war in Ukraine had a negative impact on international cooperation with foreign CSOs. In particular, foreign partners paused some cooperation projects with Belarusian organizations due to Belarus being considered a co-aggressor in Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Inter-sectoral interaction and cooperation

(Non)interaction with local authorities

“We explained to them the good deeds we had done, to which the judge said, ‘You can do good deeds without an organization’”.

From an interview.

The work of CSOs at the local level has always been influenced by local authorities. Opinions expressed in our interviews suggest that, prior to the events of 2020, the western regions (Hrodna and Brest oblast) at the level of local authorities were somewhat more favorable for civic activities compared to the eastern regions (Mahilyow and Viciebsk oblast). There were also discussions about the peculiarities of the Homiel region and its authorities, characterized as extremely unfriendly towards the third sector even before the onset of the political crisis.

After the events of 2020, relations with local authorities, even for organizations that previously had some level of interaction, either practically disappeared or were significantly restricted. The most substantial interaction with authorities occurs among social organizations that are still registered in Belarus. In cases, if local authorities fail to co-opt and fully subordinate these organizations, they attempt to use them for their own interests. One interviewee shared that local officials try to obtain numerous reports from his organization, and then report at the national level that they are supposedly working with civil society. It can be assumed that the simulation of local authorities' collaboration with civil society is formally important to have the opportunity to participate in projects of international organizations (e.g., UNDP).

“I’m struggling now... with the Social Security Fund, the executive committee - reports, the tax office - reports, everyone needs a report. Whether you have funding or not, you must submit a report every quarter. Today, the Social Security Fund also added that every month we now must submit not just a report but membership statistics. The membership statistics are quite interesting: they ‘process through’ (oh, what a beautiful name it is) a lot, somehow measuring our members - people with disabilities - by certain criteria. They measure them by ‘proportionate share’, now I remember(!), ‘proportionate share’...”

Representatives of social organizations themselves typically explain their forced collaboration with government authorities as a necessity to protect the interests of their target groups.

“I have always responded that I have more important things to do than politics. I have people with disabilities who need help, who need support, to protect their rights, and I will protect the members of my organization by any means necessary”.

If activists remain in Belarus, there are rare cases when they are invited to government agencies and educational institutions to conduct lectures or presentations on specialized topics. Some also shared experiences regarding the response from local authorities concerning communal issues for which representatives of CSOs assist citizens in formulating requests. In certain cases, advocacy by citizens with the participation of CSOs and local activists helps resolve local problems and address specific community needs. However, even such limited and specific

interactions are more of an exception than a rule. In general, interviews indicated that cooperation between CSOs and local authorities is nearly nonexistent.

“Before, we somehow collaborated, for example, with the authorities. Not exactly collaboration, but at least there were some contacts, and we could invite them to some events. They even provided some assistance, for example, from the legal side. There was at least some kind of interaction... But now, of course, there is no such thing, and it feels like everyone is for himself. That is, they are for themselves, and we are for ourselves”.

Regional activists, whose organizations were previously able to interact with authorities to some extent before facing liquidation, express their feelings toward officials with a sense of personal offense. For instance, they share experiences of how representatives of local executive committees not only failed to support them in court but essentially provided negative assessments of their organizations’ activities.

“... When we were in the liquidation stage, there was a trial. What bothered me a little was that they asked our district executive committee, as I understand it, the ideological department, whether this organization was needed for the town. They said that we did nothing as an organization. In general, it turned out that we, as an organization, didn’t participate anywhere, although we said that we were representatives of the organization; we simply worked as volunteers. But they chose such a position; they had to give such an answer that it was as if we had done nothing. The judge also caught on to this and said: ‘You don’t do anything anyway.’ We explained to them the good deeds we had done, to which the judge said: ‘You can do good deeds without an organization; no one forbids you’”.

Interestingly, in several cases, representatives of organizations working at the local level who have left Belarus mentioned that some officials remain connected with them as ‘friends’ on social media. These officials occasionally react positively to the information posted there.

Extremely limited interaction with businesses

Interaction between local CSOs and businesses is extremely limited and is more associated with personal relationships between individual activists and businessmen. Before 2020, at the local level, there was a practice of in-kind assistance, where representatives of a business could financially support a project, action, or provide their services or premises free of charge or on favorable terms. After 2020, even such interaction has decreased. It was noted that small businesses themselves are in a rather difficult situation. Interestingly, one interviewee mentioned a case where an event previously organized by his organization now “by inheritance” moved to a commercial club where it was held.

Interaction with state and independent media

Interaction between local CSOs and state media is practically non-existent, although it may have occurred in the past. Many now emphasize that they can have nothing to do with state

media due to ideological reasons. In addition, our interviewees shared experiences where state media and propagandistic channels launched propaganda attacks against them.

“We don’t interact with government officials in any way. However, all sorts of ‘Zheltye Slivy’⁴ follow us and sometimes write something about us”.

In parallel, there is communication between activists and journalists of independent media on a personal level, which seems natural, especially in the case of activists and journalists from the same city. Interviewees mentioned that before 2020, they had more interaction with local independent media, but now it has understandably decreased due to repression and ‘extremist’ statuses.

“Over the past year, no [cooperation with independent media]. There were attempts as early as 2 years ago. Well, we took some small actions with local independent media... but over the past year - no, we cancelled these activities as well”.

As all the organizations we spoke to operate within Belarus, they are cautious about contacts with independent media. Nevertheless, activists may speak out, give interviews, and provide comments to the media on their own behalf.

“We don’t give any interviews inside Belarus, and so on. There’s no point in somehow increasing our visibility in the media because it’s unsafe. That’s why we refrain from doing this, even if approached and asked. It’s not safe for those in Belarus. We present ourselves as activists in exile ... I just [state that I] am an activist of the Belarusian [third] sector, to avoid unnecessary attention to the team”.

In some cases, relocated local CSOs essentially take on the role of media, developing their social networks and prioritizing informing the population about events in their city in Belarus, as well as in the country.

Interaction with democratic political actors

Our interviewees discussed their interaction with democratic Belarusian politicians more in the context of personal relationships. In cases where activists are acquainted with individuals in democratic opposition structures, they may communicate and discuss specific issues. At a systemic, institutional level, it was noted that some organizations and initiatives occasionally participate in consultations and meetings organized by the democratic opposition forces. They may also potentially bring up issues and questions that concern them. Some interviewees identified themselves not only as civil activists but also as local politicians and members of the Coordination Council. Additionally, they pointed out the common occurrence that in Belarus, local activists often become members of opposition political parties.

However, in general, the question of interaction with democratic opposition did not evoke strong reactions or elaborate responses from our interviewees.

⁴ A propagandist, state-run Telegram channel.

Relations with foreign donor structures and satisfaction with support programs

Many of the organizations and initiatives in our sample expressed a lack of direct interaction with donor organizations. For organizations which act on a local level with leadership based within the country, this poses safety concerns. Additionally, during interviews, some representatives mentioned not knowing whom (what donors' organizations) to contact and stated that donors lack formats and methods for communication with them. Certain local-level organizations, either subsidiaries of larger entities or part of umbrella structures, indicated that communication with donors is typically handled by the leaders of the parent organization or umbrella structure. However, some interviewees mentioned that their contacts with donors are outdated, and they have not established new connections.

“We have some connections... There were some old ones, so we reached out to someone who used to work with Belarus. Now they work very little with Belarus, and we don't fall into this stream”.

Interestingly, one of our interviewees, who recently left Belarus, mentioned not knowing whom to approach for support for their ideas and projects. They also admitted to being unsure about how to engage with the donor community.

“We need to seek additional support, and I don't know, for instance, which funds to approach. I have a rough idea of who I can ask, but I'm not certain if they'll provide the information... Also, I'm unsure of how to communicate with these funds, how to convey who we are, what we need, and what we do. I want to assure them that they can trust me, highlighting my past projects that received support from others. I just don't know how to access international help. As the leader of a Belarusian team from Belarus, I lack that knowledge”.

Those organizations and activists who have connections and relationships with donors generally spoke positively about them. However, they also noted that in cases where their project proposals were rejected, they do not always understand the logic and reasons for the rejections and often do not receive sufficient explanations in this regard.

Positive practices mentioned included cases where donors regularly communicate with grant recipients and provide them with feedback. An example of good practice was also cited, where one of the funds demonstrated a flexible project management approach, prioritizing the safety of people in Belarus over strict technical compliance with reporting requirements.

“We received support from [name of foundation], and there was so much acceptance, so much understanding. They immediately said, ‘Of course, you are cool, but tone down your performance. You're cool but try to do it like this and like that’. When we asked, ‘Can we be super neutral?’, they responded, ‘Do everything in a way that is safe for you’”.

In several other interviews, positive assessments were also voiced regarding the fact that some donors have recently eased reporting requirements and become more flexible. However, it was still pointed out that there are numerous problems in this regard.

Those who demonstrated greater awareness of donor support issues spoke about relative satisfaction with existing programs, noting the presence of sufficiently broad and diverse opportunities to submit applications. However, they also highlighted the increasing competition among Belarusian organizations when it comes to submitting applications.

“I would say that they [donor support programs] are probably adequate, as we still exist, and help is being provided to people... In general, it seems to me that now, in principle, there are enough opportunities if, of course, we don’t miss them”.

“It seems to me that there are some positive changes related to the requirement for certain reporting, especially if it’s online, or involves the transfer of money for unregistered activities. In this regard, it seems possible to work. While it’s challenging with some, others are very easy and lack bureaucracy. It’s important that the funds are available, and people are working”.

A certain complexity in implementing donor support programs for Belarus was identified in situations where managers change within donor organizations, leading to a loss of institutional memory about Belarusian partners and practices of interaction with them. Another challenge mentioned was the delayed and lengthy responses to requests from CSOs, where activists expect quick reactions.

Perhaps the most significant challenge, not only in terms of relationships with donors’ organizations but also in the broader policy context regarding Belarusian civil society, was identified as the lack of a clear strategy by Western donors towards Belarus (or lack of awareness of it by activists). According to the interviewees, this results in a problem of insufficient understanding of how to deal with organizations and initiatives that remain within Belarus and how to support those working at the local level.

“At the national level and even among the donor community and such, there is absolutely no strategy related to the question: well, there is Belarus - and what do we do with it? There are such and such problems - what road map do we have, what strategic goals do we set, and how do we go about them? If there are these goals, if there are people ready to pursue them, and there are means that allow us to not just do anything but something more or less adequate and high-quality, then that’s how it is in the district centers”.

VII. ORGANIZATIONS' NEEDS' ASSESSMENT: REQUIRED SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE

People from organizations which act locally in Belarus voiced and discussed various needs. These needs are largely determined by the location of the interviewee and the situation of their organization. Requests for support can be broadly categorized as follows:

1. Financial support for activities inside Belarus.

Activists mentioned the need for any, even minimal, first of all, financial support on the ground to continue providing services and organizing events. Currently, they believe that such support is either nonexistent or insufficient. It is crucial that when allocating such support, the requests of those working within the country are taken into account. There is a request for financial support for renting venues in Belarus to hold events. Additionally, there is a separate request for support in providing legal and psychological offline services within the country. Interviewees claimed to have technical solutions for transferring funds received abroad to Belarus.

2. Legal support for organizational activities.

This support may include consultations, both within Belarus and abroad, on issues related to registration, the functioning of CSOs, and commercial structures.

3. Psychological support. This type of assistance is needed for both organizational teams and their target groups, including individuals in Belarus with whom they work.

Support for applications and expenses for psychological support programs from donors is needed. Interviewees repeatedly shared stories about how requests for psychological support are either not supported or are insufficiently supported, or not in the form requested by the organizations themselves.

4. Support for strategic planning and requests for physical meetings of organizational teams whose members work from different countries. Assistance for participation in these meetings for those are in Belarus and can travel to attend.

5. Simplification of project reporting systems, especially in cases where projects are implemented within Belarus. Requests were made to avoid requiring physical signatures with deciphered surnames when acknowledgments are provided by individuals living in Belarus. There was also a need to assess the proportionality between the required reporting and the support provided, as activists often find themselves having to provide complex reports for small sums.

6. Opportunities for providing quick, emergency support in cases where an organization has an urgent request. For example, related to evacuation from the country or urgent provision of medical, psychological, or other assistance to a staff member.

7. Scholarship or special support program for activists forced to leave Belarus urgently. This type of assistance was considered relevant, especially for people from Belarusian regions who often lack any financial safety nets.

8. Assistance in acquiring new office equipment and phones. This request is relevant for both those who are still in Belarus and for activists who have left. It was noted that such programs existed in 2020 and 2021, but they did not meet the existing needs. For example, some activists left Ukraine after the start of the war, and for them, the issue of equipment became relevant again.
9. The need to improve communication both within the sector and with the donor community. There is a problem within civil society of organizations having low awareness of each other's activities. Furthermore, there is a need for supplementary venues, events and occasions for communication between CSOs and donors, facilitating a form of reality check that considers the perspectives of diverse stakeholders.
10. Support for networking events for Belarusian civil society organizations and initiatives, especially beneficial for those operating at the local level.
11. Conducting educational events for activists from Belarus with travel to other countries. The request ranged from general educational events, such as studying best practices of certain institutions, to training and consultations on legal issues, security topics, etc. These outbound events were also proposed to include familiarization with existing donor support programs and opportunities.
12. Support for CSOs' media projects, seen as an important area of activity focusing directly on the audience within Belarus.
13. Assistance in finding and recruiting new people for the organization. This request also has a security dimension, where, on the one hand, organizations may need new employees. On the other hand, due to existing security risks, it is very difficult to verify and ensure that a new person can be accepted into the team.
14. Support and conduct of educational events for mixed audiences: Belarusians living in the country and those who have left. Such events are seen as promoting communication and improving mutual understanding.

Some interviewees emotionally concluded that it is entirely unclear what and how one can help Belarusian organizations and activists who continue to operate within the country.

“If we are talking about help, I don't know what can be done to help me now or the activists who are currently in Belarus. They can be arrested at any time, not even for social activities, but simply for reasons unknown...”

“What support do you need? – A difficult question. I want to answer - to pray. You know, so that everything changes. It seems to me that [I] do not know other mechanisms”.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, based on the analysis of interviews with representatives of local organizations in Belarus, we have examined various aspects of their activities, analyzed the current state, problems, and requests for possible support. The main conclusions are:

1. Public activities of various kinds are possible and taking place at the local level in Belarus, but they predominantly have a non-political and neutral character. Organizations, mostly deprived of legal status, often continue their activities but in a limited capacity.
2. Local-level civil society organizations and initiatives operating within Belarus face approximately the same problems. We did not identify significant local differences during the research, except for varying levels of intensity of repression against organizations and activists.
3. State repression against civil society has led to a significant change in its structure. Overall, everyone suffered from repression, although regions and cities with more developed civil society, a higher level of protest mobilization in 2020, and places where local officials were motivated to take repressive actions suffered the most. As a result of these changes, the volume of services provided by civil society and the events they organize has significantly decreased. The state, either independently or with the help of GONGOs, has not been able to offer any real alternatives, although in some cases, it attempts to simulate civil activity and coopt social organizations.
4. In Belarusian cities and towns, there is still demand among people for projects, activities, and services provided by civil society, as well as, more broadly, for grassroots activism, networking, and the development of horizontal communication and connections.
5. Among the important dilemmas and problems faced by Belarusian local (and not only) organizations, especially when their main activity is concentrated within Belarus, is the forced operation with the lowest degree of visibility. This “invisibility” creates the impression that “everything has died” and “nothing is left”. However, CSOs cannot afford greater visibility, except for those working in the (social) media format from abroad.
6. There is a demand for support for organizations, initiatives, and activities within Belarus, which, according to the interview results, is currently not being met.