

Civil Society in Belarus in the Context of a Political Crisis: Current State and Challenges

Research report

2021

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Overview

The paper analyzes the state of organized civil society and new initiatives that have arisen in Belarus during the political crisis that began in the wake of the 2020 presidential elections. Field research for this work was carried out from the beginning of 2021 to June of this year, that is, it does not cover the period associated with institutional repression against civil society organizations in Belarus (however, an additional post facto review will be devoted to this topic). This text offers a look at the state of various civil society actors in Belarus, what problems they faced in their work, and what kind of assistance they need. In addition, the situation with Belarusian independent media, diaspora and business was analyzed, and needs that were relevant at the time of the study were noted. These three subjects are considered separately, since their activities seem to be important for understanding the processes taking place in Belarusian society. At the same time, these require additional support due to the circumstances occurring in Belarus. At the end of this work, general conclusions are presented.

CONTEXT, PURPOSE AND STAGES OF RESEARCH

This study was conceived in the winter of 2021, when it became obvious that the political crisis that began in Belarus after the 2020 elections was entering a protracted phase. The **purpose of the study** was to analyze the role of both existing (and established) civil society organizations (CSOs) and new public initiatives that emerged in the wake of the protest, to assess their potential, to analyze the main problems they face, and to outline their real needs and prospects for development.

Since beginning the study, the situation in civil society has undergone serious changes, and the political crisis in the country has not only not been resolved but has increasingly worsened. Given this, the research team was called upon to adjust some of findings, considering new information and events that occurred after completing the collection of empirical data.

Context. The primary long-term factor in the unfolding of the political crisis in Belarus is the desynchronization and multidirectional development of Belarusian society and the established political regime. Here can be discussed the development of a demand for socio-political transformations in society, which is characteristic of at least the last 10 years (after the 2010 presidential elections) and which became clear in 2020.

In the short term, the unfolding of the processes of activation of Belarusian society and the beginning of the political crisis, the obvious manifestation of which was the socio-political mobilization during the election campaign and the mass protests of August-November 2020, can be traced back to 2019. The first, not so clear stage was the process of “deepening integration” with Russia, which presented a new round of growing threats to Belarus’s sovereignty. The second stage of activation, which manifested itself more clearly, involved the challenges associated with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state and public institutions’ response. Without delving into an analysis of these processes, it can be noted that many of these, as well as the types of actions, and the role and place of different subjects, continued at the third stage, which can be understood as political mobilization during the election campaign and the mass protests that followed in August.

These two stages are characterized by a set of changes in the work of civil society structures and the nature of their interaction with other actors, among which include the following:

- Changes in coordinating activities and functioning of CSOs and business campaigns, which are similar and are caused by the reaction to the coronavirus crisis (transition to remote work, online processes, new markets and services in the case of business and new target groups or formats of work for CSOs)¹.

¹ Marples, David R. “Stalin’s Ghosts, Parasites, and Pandemic: The Roots of the 2020 Uprising in Belarus: 2021 Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies.” *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 1, no. aop (2021): 1-22.

- Losses in institutional and long-term cooperation and interaction between business and CSOs, conversion of resources (human and financial) into short-term campaigns associated with solving urgent problems, expansion of the forms and amount of cooperation.
- A breakthrough in the use of information technology in solving social problems.
- Redistribution of the spheres of influence of various types of media towards an increase in the role of independent media and “new media” and a drop in the level of trust in state media².
- A general deepening of the crisis of confidence in state institutions, destruction of the “social contract”³ and delegitimization of the political regime.
- Viral dissemination and scaling of initiatives aimed at solving urgent social problems.
- The gradual activation of the Belarusian diaspora, characterized by the transition from symbolic support for actions of various types to active participation in crowdfunding and crowdsourcing, including for those related to the coronavirus.

The level and character of public and political mobilization during the 2020 election campaign was largely determined by these processes and changes.

After the presidential elections on August 9, 2020, during which numerous falsifications and violations were recorded, mass protests began in Belarus. In the early days of protests, more than 7,000 people were detained throughout Belarus, disproportionate violence and lachrymatory agents were used against demonstrators, and detainees were beaten and tortured.

However, attempts to quell public outcry through brutality and violence have backfired. Massive protests continued until mid-November 2020, despite increased political repression. By the winter of 2020, street protests were largely suppressed, with many members of the protest movement subject to administrative and criminal prosecution and forced to leave the country. Most of the prominent public figures during the election campaign and in the first weeks of the unfolding of street protests were found abroad or in prison.

Despite the suppression of street protests, the situation has not stabilized and the political crisis has not been resolved. The government refuses any form of dialogue with civil society, continuing to spin the flywheel of repression (as of October 6, 2021, 801 people in Belarus were recognized as political prisoners). Crisis trends in the economy are intensifying, and international and sanctions pressure is growing. The available data from opinion polls show

² Bosse G. et al. (2020). Freedom of Speech and Media Plurality in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/Freedom-of-Speech-and-Media-Plurality-Paper-2021.pdf>

³ Douglas, Nadja. 2020. “Belarus: From the Old Social Contract to a New Social Identity.” Centre for East European and International Studies. ZOIS Report 9/11/2020. <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/belarus-from-the-old-social-contract-to-a-new-social-identity>.

a critically low level of trust in all state institutions and the persistence of a high level of social tension across Belarusian society⁴.

Target groups, stages of research, and data collection methods

Another objective of the study is to look at the changes in the role and position of independent media and business as important actors influencing the process of socio-political transformations generally and the development of civil society. In addition, special attention is paid to the analysis of processes taking place in the Belarusian diaspora, the activation of which in 2020-2021 is also significant for understanding the current situation and prospects for the development of civil society in Belarus. With the increase in the flow of refugees from Belarus, the role of the diaspora, new organizations and initiatives created during this period in different countries, especially neighboring countries (Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine) receiving most migrants, is increasing.

The events of 2020 became an impetus for a quantitative and qualitative shift in the state of civil society, requiring analysis and consideration of both the condition and problems of the “third sector” (organized civil society and existing “traditional” organizations of various types and spheres of activity), and triggered a massive surge of civil and public activity outside the framework of existing structures. Therefore, the focus of this study is on civil society organizations and “new communities” that have emerged in the wake of political mobilization.

An additional objective of the study is to analyze the changes in the role and position of independent media and business as important actors influencing the process of socio-political transformations in general and the development of civil society. In addition, special attention is paid to the analysis of the processes taking place in the Belarusian diaspora, the process of activation of which in 2020-2021 is also significant for understanding the situation and prospects for the development of civil society in Belarus. With the increase in the flow of refugees from Belarus, the role of the diaspora, new organizations and initiatives created during this period in different countries, especially geographically close ones (Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine), receiving the main flow of migrants, is increasing.

Stages and empirical base for research

1. Development of research program and tools: February 2021
2. Field stage (collection of empirical data): March-August 2021
 - Civil society organizations: 5 semi-structured interviews with CSO activists focusing on the development of the third sector; online survey of CSOs (62 questionnaires collected); focus group interviews with representatives of different

⁴ What Belarusians think about the protests (relative to the fifth wave Chatham House) // <https://newbelarus.vision/shto-belarusy-dumayut-pra-pratesty/>

thematic sectors of CSOs (8 focus groups held with the total number of participants at 67).

- Activists of “new communities”: 5 semi-structured interviews with CSO activists and experts who had experience working with “new communities”; 30 semi-structured interviews with “new communities” activists (“courtyard” and city communities, strike committees, independent trade unions); online survey of activists of “new communities” (663 questionnaires collected).
- Independent media: 10 semi-structured interviews with representatives of non-state media: internet media, Telegram channels, YouTube channels and blogs.
- Business sector: 7 semi-structured interviews with representatives of business unions at the national and regional level, business associations, start-up hub, and research center.
- Belarusian diaspora: 10 semi-structured interviews with representatives of Belarusian organizations located in three countries: Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

3. Data analysis and preparing conclusions and recommendations: August-October 2021

1. CHANGES IN THE CONDITIONS FOR ACTIVITY, CURRENT STATE AND RELEVANT NEEDS FOR BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS)

This section analyzes the changes in the conditions, character and intensity of CSO activities in the context of the unfolding political crisis in the country. Based on open sources and surveys of CSO activists, the author considers the main problems faced by the Belarusian “third sector,” priority directions for further movement and the urgent tasks it faces. Analysis of the research data shows that the constant deterioration of conditions for the work of CSOs and the multiple challenges they face brings many organizations to the brink of survival and demands new forms of structuring of activities from CSOs themselves, including the rejection of traditional schemes of interaction with stakeholders, changes in the methods of planning and management, and rethinking their place and role in the process of socio-political transformations.

The conditions for the development of civil society are understood as a set of conditions that contributes to its development (enabling environment)⁵. Traditionally, the set of such conditions includes:

- Political conditions: the possibility of realizing basic civil rights and freedoms and involvement of civil society in political decision-making and management processes.
- Economic and financial conditions: opportunities for obtaining and operating financial resources, financial stability of organizations, including issues involving the possibility of obtaining and using sponsorship, charitable, and foreign financial assistance and funds received through crowdfunding and crowdsourcing.
- Legal conditions: legal framework and guarantees of civil rights and freedoms, conditions for registration and liquidation of organizations, conditions for operating finance and for the implementation of key activities.
- Institutional conditions: political culture, trust, stereotypes, motivation for social activities, decision-making procedures, and work organization.
- Media environment: level of informatization and digitalization, main channels for media consumption, development of different types of media and their influence and access, development of social networks, and characteristics of media consumption.

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

Clearly, one of the most serious challenges is the changing **political** and legal environment. Given the political crisis, we, on the one hand, observed a high degree of political mobilization of society during the election campaign and post-election protests. On the other hand, it should be noted that the civil society structures and organizations that emerged by

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

2020 (including political parties) did not play a proactive role in these processes; that is, they were not their initiators. The drivers of political mobilization were completely different forces and subjects, while third sector organizations played more of a supporting role in ongoing processes and were involved in them, as a rule, at the level of activists' individual participation rather than at the institutional level. Since the attempt to change the existing political regime through public efforts did not lead to quick positive changes, today we have found ourselves in reactive position. Protest moods are suppressed by the authorities with the help of repressions and the Belarusian regime has neither a positive program for resolving the political crisis nor means of controlling the situation, save the use of force. Accordingly, realizing civil rights and freedoms in the country today is out of the question.

It is difficult to talk about **legal conditions** and the legal environment today for two reasons. First, many different negative changes of order and scale that occurred during this period require a separate analysis and cannot be concisely reflected on in this text⁶. Second, under conditions of legal default, the concept of law loses its functional significance since law enforcement practice has deteriorated to the point that it makes analysis of legislative changes practically meaningless.

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

The pace of institutional repression against CSOs is growing. On July 30, 2021, Lukashenko said at a meeting with local activists that “as a result of the measures taken, 185 destructive organizations were identified that pose a potential threat to national security, including a representative office of a foreign non-profit organization, 71 national and local public associations, and 113 institutions.”⁷ It seemed that these figures were “suggestive” for carrying out institutional repression against the third sector, but in reality the scale turned out to be much larger. As of September 18, 2021, according to Lawtrend, 154 non-profit institutions and 89 public organizations, associations, and foundations were liquidated or were in the process of liquidation. On July 14, 2021, there was a series of arrests of activists of public organizations and searches of the offices of organizations and at the residencies of activists.

The rhetoric and actions of the Belarusian authorities today are aimed at destroying any independent activity in principle. Therefore, repressions and restrictions at the new stage will

⁶ More information on this aspect can be found in regular reviews by the Center for Legal Transformation // <http://www.lawtrend.org/>

⁷ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nko-pod-vidom-blagotvoritelnosti-otrabyvajut-chuzhoj-politicheskij-zakaz-452930-2021/>

concern more and more not only those who disagree with the status quo, but also with respect to any initiative that does not originate and/or is not completely controlled by state bodies.

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

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

The change in **institutional conditions** has been twofold. On the one hand, the mobilization upsurge in the summer-autumn of 2020 triggered many positive changes in the level of trust, solidarity, and activity of citizens. It inspired a rejection of the stereotypical perception of “politics” and “social activity” as “unworthy,” “dangerous” or as marginal spheres and work and activated an explosive process of forming a positive image of “self” as a civic nation concomitant with the forming of many new civic initiatives and local communities. However, the rapid onset of a violent reaction calls into question the endurance and long-term nature of these effects.

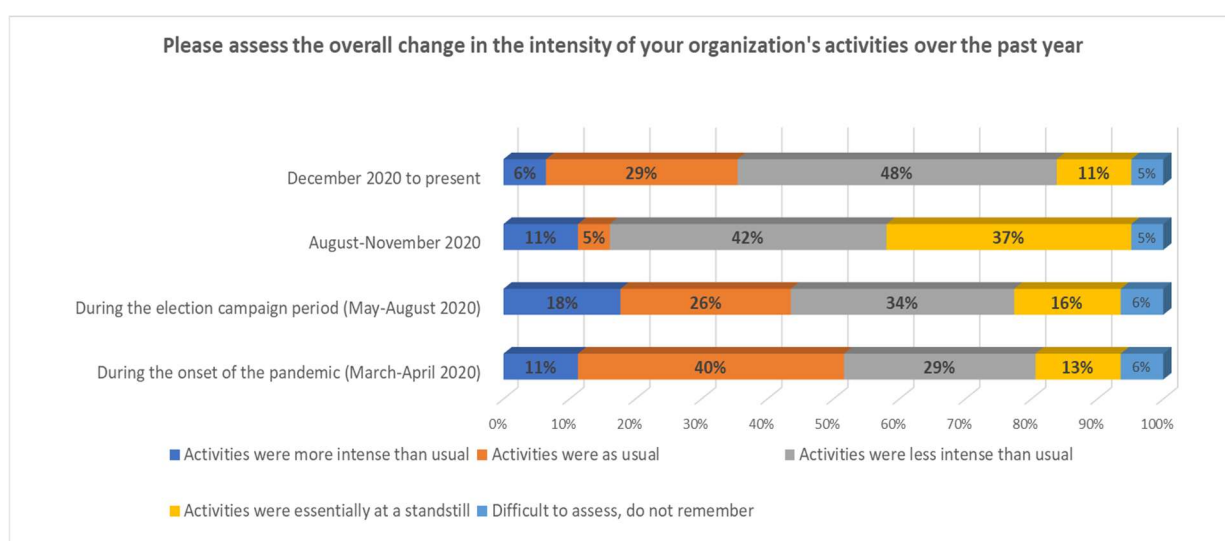
Still, we can now see a quantitative and qualitative shift in the state of civil society that requires analyzing and considering both the state and problems of the “third sector” (organized civil society, existing “traditional” organizations of various types and thematic focus) and the massive surge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

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

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

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

Fig. 1.1. Change in the intensity of organizations' work



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

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

50 out of 62 respondents noted the problem of the unfeasibility of long-term planning, and another 38 (more than half) the impossibility of implementing plans and projects due to having the situation constantly change. In addition, 51 respondents noted that the statement “We were forced to abandon our long-term plans indefinitely” is true or partially true for their organization.

Table 1.1. Challenges faced by CSOs

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

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

Today, to these challenges are added the question of how to continue the activities of organizations and institutions that have been or will soon be deprived of registration. That is, they are threatened with completely losing their legal status and associated (albeit limited) opportunities.

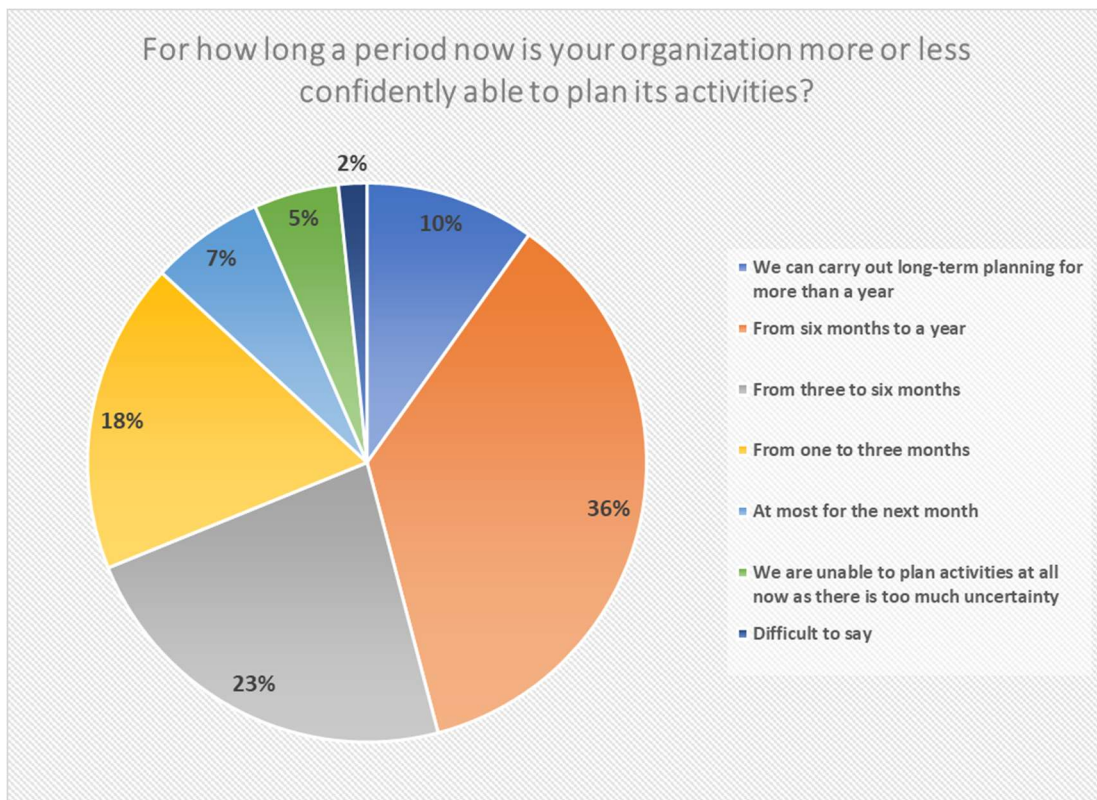
As far as factors hampering planning are concerned, it is not only the operating conditions for the organization itself but also the general situation in the country that affects, among other things, partners and different groups with which it needs to interact. Nobody

knows what will happen tomorrow with the organizations with which joint actions have been planned; that is, how the position of local authorities may change relative to a particular project or event or how people will react to the agenda and areas of activity that organizations were engaged in previously.

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

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

Fig. 1.2. Prospective planning for CSOs



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

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

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

The second important direction for maintaining the functioning and survival of the third sector is **ensuring the security of organizations and its members while holding on to staff and human potential.** At the time of the survey, half of organizations surveyed faced harassment of their members because of their political or civic positions. 8 out of 62 underwent baseless inspections and claims from various government agencies (the Department of Financial Investigations (FID), tax services, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, sanitary services, etc.). As further developments show, the intensity of pressure on organizations, right up to their liquidation, is growing and most likely will continue to grow. The problem of increasing the level of repression and tightening legislation on the activities of CSOs also led in the top 5 rating of problems during focus groups. More importantly, however, is the task of ensuring the safety of organizations and the protection of activists, which was first concern for all CSO thematic sectors starting from human rights and ending with those working on social issues.

The repressive pressure on CSOs today has three main directions.

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

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

The third is a significant reduction in or limitation of funding opportunities for activities. Registration of grants in the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the Office of the President's

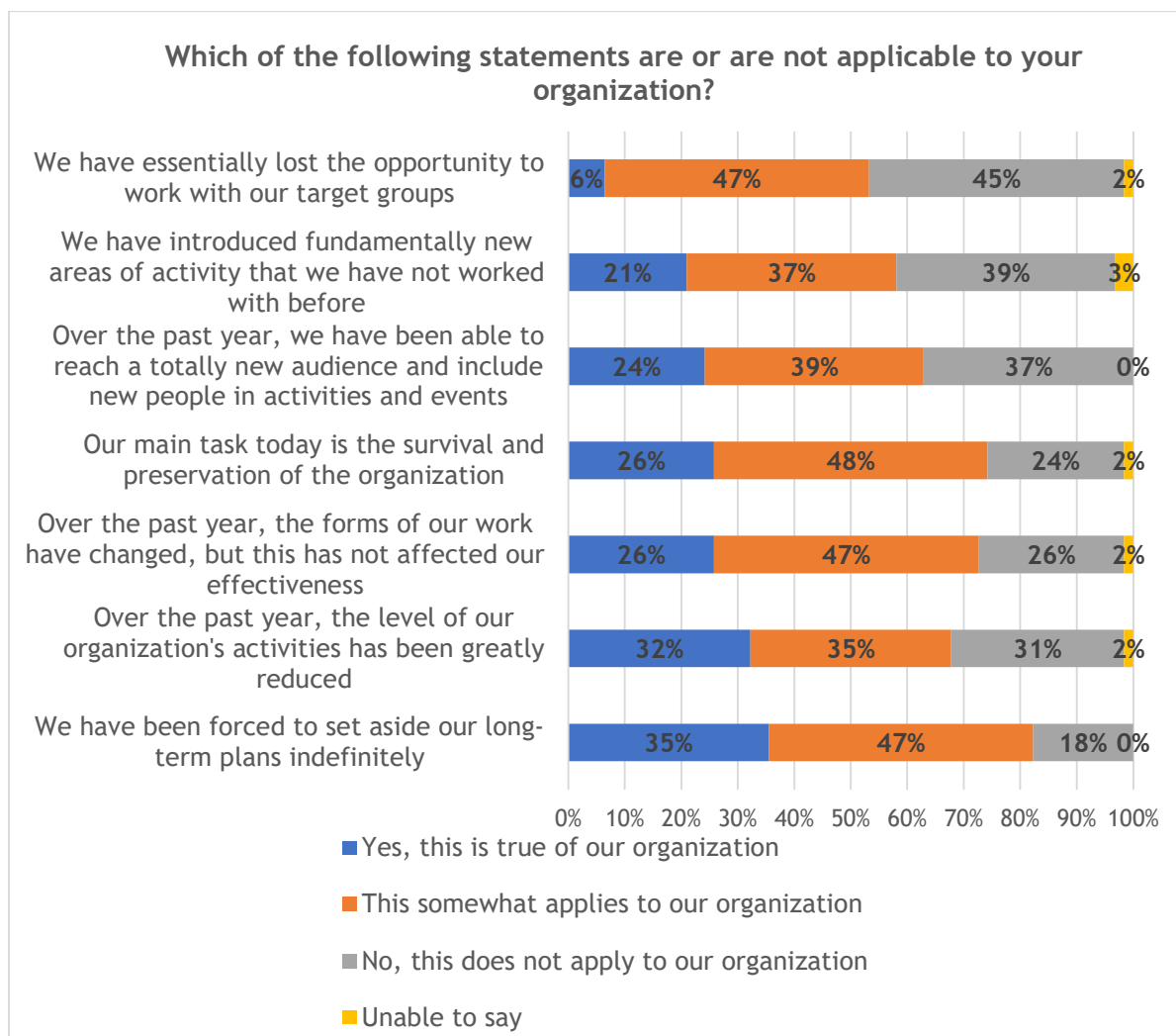
Affairs is essentially suspended or is carried out sporadically and without any discernable logic. Even small grants for non-political (apolitical) social organizations working with vulnerable groups are not registered. Paradoxically, the formerly most sanctioned areas of activity (for example, registration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

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

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

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

Fig. 1.3. CSO access to target groups



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

The work of organizations that partnered with local communities and local urban projects on environmental problems, urban and rural development, involving residents in public discussions, city actions, landscaping, etc., became significantly more difficult. There have been problems in these areas before, but in most cases such activities were carried out either

in partnership or at least in agreement with local authorities, and the activities themselves were considered by the state authorities to be useful and safe. However, as the political crisis unfolds any independent public activity is stigmatized and given the explosion of “courtyard activity” in the fall of 2020, local communities are particularly suspicious.

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

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

Another important characteristic of the current state of CSOs is the nature of relations with authorities at different levels. As the political crisis unfolds, this interaction (already of a limited nature) is steadily collapsing. Of the 62 CSO activists interviewed for this study, 49 responded that the level of interaction of their organization with the authorities at various levels changed during this period. 29 of these noted a decrease in the level of interaction and 19 its complete collapse. In most cases, the cessation of interaction took place at the initiative of organizations themselves and not state bodies (23 over 14 and another 12 responding that it was a “mutual process”). Clearly, after the “clean-up” of CSOs - the liquidation of many organizations that took place after the survey was completed - the level of interaction with the authorities at all levels is continuing to decrease as the organizations being liquidated lose their institutional capacity for this.

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

The first concerns the political and ethical issues of cooperation with the regime, which has lost its legitimacy and is carrying out massive repressions against its own citizens. Focus group discussions demonstrated that CSO activists have different attitudes towards the collective responsibility of government structures and individual officials in the current situation. There is a position held in which cooperation with representatives of government at any level is fundamentally impossible, and a softer position that allows a selective approach to this issue. In general, the problem of interaction with the authorities and officials is quite painful. Those organizations and activists who justify maintaining relations with the state

explain this through talking about the interests of their target groups, the personal non-involvement of certain officials and structures in the crimes of the regime, and the need to refrain from splitting and polarizing society, however they voice their position tentatively, as if making excuses.

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

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

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

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

1.2. Activity priorities and urgent tasks for CSOs

During the survey of CSOs in April-May, we asked how activists see their organization in a year. Most of the answers can be boiled down to that of one respondent: “Two options: 1.

Expanding the target audience and the scope of activities; or 2. Complete closure.” For some, a more realistic option at that time was “complete closure,” whereas for others it was “expansion,” but in the overwhelming majority of cases, the future of a person’s organization was connected with the resolution (or not resolution) of the country’s political crisis and the general conditions for CSO activities.

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

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

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

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

Table 1.2. Relevant tasks for CSOs

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1.3. Relevant topics and challenges for CSOs’ work

| What relevant issues would you and your organization like and would be able to participate in resolving? (April-May 2021) | % | Number (out of 62) |
|---|-----|--------------------|
| Civic education and raising the level of civic competency | 77% | 47 |
| Local community development | 69% | 42 |
| Promotion of Belarusian culture and language | 51% | 31 |
| Development of local government | 39% | 24 |
| Helping vulnerable social groups in times of crisis | 31% | 19 |

| | | |
|---|-----|----|
| Bridging the split in Belarusian society and conflict mediation | 31% | 19 |
| Business development | 23% | 14 |
| Legal assistance and consultation | 20% | 12 |
| Human rights activities | 8% | 5 |
| Assistance to physicians and the healthcare system | 7% | 4 |
| Other | 15% | 9 |

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

When asked which target groups are in greatest need of support now, most of the answers can be reduced to 6 target groups. The most frequently named forms of assistance and support for different target groups are financial, legal, and psychological. Substantively, as assistance for different target groups, the following are proposed:

| Target group | Forms of assistance and support |
|--|---|
| Victims of repressions, their families (not only political prisoners and detainees, but also those who lost their jobs, were “banned from their profession” or were subjected to other forms of pressure for their civic stance) | Financial assistance, legal advice, psychological assistance, assistance in employment, resocialization, and, if necessary, relocation |
| Initiatives that arose during the political crisis: trade unions, courtyards, local communities and collegial bodies of territorial public self-government (KOTOS), strike committees, etc. | Assistance in organizational development; political and civic education; building communication and networks of interaction internally and with political leaders; trainings and education on security issues (including digital), legal advice, psychological assistance |
| Third sector - CSO activists | Basic and operational support; administrative and consulting support because of changes in workflow; machinery and equipment for work; training and advice on new areas of work; psychological assistance, combating “burnout” |
| Independent media, journalists | Financial support, legal assistance, internships or the possibility of “sabbatical” outside Belarus (at the time of the survey, there had not yet been a massive departure from editorial offices or of journalists abroad) |

| | |
|--|--|
| Youth, youth organizations and initiatives | Psychological and legal assistance, opportunities for additional education (e.g., distance learning), internships or the opportunity to continue education outside the country |
| Vulnerable groups (elderly, people with special needs) | Basic support projects |

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

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

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

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

Table 1.4. Emerging needs of CSOs

| What new needs did your organization have in connection with the changes in the operating environment over the past year? (April-May 2021) | % | Number |
|--|-----|--------|
| Digital security | 71% | 44 |
| Skills in planning activities under uncertain conditions | 65% | 40 |
| Organizing management processes remotely | 60% | 37 |
| Providing physical security | 53% | 33 |
| IT and online technology skills | 48% | 30 |
| Donors to adapt rules for working with organizations | 48% | 30 |
| Legal assistance | 47% | 29 |
| Additional financial resources to adapt to new conditions | 45% | 28 |

| | | |
|--|-----|----|
| Forging connections with totally new audiences | 39% | 24 |
| Something else: | 3% | 2 |
| No new needs arose | 2% | 1 |

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

Another area that has seen relatively new demand for CSOs is readiness for the possibility of search and detention of individual activists and organizations. In practice, CSO activists and other citizens often lack understanding of how to behave during a search or interrogation, how to provide quick communication and information in emergency situations, how to find a lawyer, how to interact with other organization members in the event of a supervisor or activists being detained, etc.

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

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

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

Among the areas of support that were most relevant in April-May 2021, the priorities for both individual organizations and the sector were “support for the organization’s fixed costs,” “organizational development,” and “creation and support of CSO coalitions.” It can be assumed that with the deterioration of conditions for the work of CSOs, such support will be even more in demand. At the same time, it is necessary to understand that for organizations that are now subject to repression, searches, and liquidation of their legal entities - but which intend to

continue working - operational and institutional support is increasingly in demand, but in completely new forms. There are new needs for spending on equipment to replace that which was seized, rent for personal housing, new types of legal services and consultations, relocation and setup costs in a new country, etc.

Table 1.5. Relevant areas of support

| What areas of support are most relevant at the moment (April-May 2021): | For your organization | For your sector |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Support for the organization's fixed costs (accounting, rent, utility bills, taxes, etc.) | 59% | 67% |
| Organizational development - new skills, competencies, etc. | 56% | 61% |
| Creation and support of coalitions, associations, networks, and other community organizations for NGO joint action | 56% | 61% |
| Domestic advocacy campaigns | 30% | 39% |
| International advocacy campaigns | 15% | 13% |
| Difficult to say | 13% | 8% |
| Other (please indicate) | 11% | 7% |

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSIONS

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

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

The changed conditions of existence (environment) for civil society require abandoning the traditional schemes of CSO interaction with various stakeholders, including the state (national and local authorities), since all free and independent activity is essentially “outside the law.”

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

2. “NEW COMMUNITIES”: REAL CONDITIONS AND NEEDS

In this part of the study, we consider the phenomenon of the forming of different types of proto-communities that became one of the social effects of the political mobilization of 2020. Based on interviews and online polls of activists of “new communities” - local (city, “courtyard” and neighborhood), professional and student, strike committees and independent trade unions - the section analyzes the dynamics of formation and development, the main problems and needs of the “new communities” and the nature and intensity of their ties with other actors. An analysis of the results of the research shows that today the “new communities” have been forced to focus on issues of security, mutual assistance and their own propagation, having neither opportunity nor clear ideas about what forms of activity can lead to the success of common political goals.

Important characteristics of the socio-political mobilization of 2020 include the high level of self-organization of Belarusian protest movements, the rapid development of horizontal ties and the inclusion in the general movement of many people who up to that point were indifferent to politics. During the pre-election campaign, methods of action that were supposed to support the movement for change were spread virally. These include collecting signatures for candidates, campaigns for nominations of members to election commissions and independent observers, independent (not directly related to candidate headquarters) initiatives that appeared that were supposed to promote honesty and transparency of elections (sending letters to members of election commissions for the “Fresh Wind” campaign, the “Golos” platform, and “Zubr”), proposals for concrete actions that were disseminated through networks (e.g., the proposal to wait for the election results at polling stations, which played an important role in the mass protests on August 9), etc.

In addition to the actual political mobilization of many people who had not previously shown an interest in politics, the mass protests in August-September 2020 led to the formation of new communities (or at least proto-communities) of various types. On the wave of protest activity, groups and communities were formed that united people according to different social characteristics: professionals, students, women, youth, communities of the elderly, etc. A notable phenomenon was the formation of strike committees at businesses and the development of the trade union movement. However, the most widespread development was the formation of local (urban, neighboring or “courtyard”) proto-communities.

Within the framework of this study, a goal was set to assess the condition, needs and development potential of the “new communities” that remain active.

The empirical basis for the analysis in this part of the study include the following:

1. 5 semi-structured interviews with CSO activists and experts who had experience working with “new communities” starting in September 2020 (March 2021)

2. 30 semi-structured interviews with activists of the “new communities” (“courtyard” and city communities, strike committees, independent trade unions. Interview period: April 26 - May 20, 2021)
3. An online survey of “new communities” activists (663 questionnaires were collected that meet the characteristics of the target audience (participation in the activities of sustainable communities) and that passed a preliminary check for completeness and quality. Survey period: July 9-18, 2021. Primary method of questionnaire distribution was through Telegram channels⁸)

In the absence of data on the general population, including its size and structure, it is impossible to construct a sample. Therefore, the survey data do not claim to be representative and cannot be interpreted as reflecting the situation in the country generally. Nevertheless, given the large number of activists who took part in the survey and the possibility of supplementing the analysis with data from semi-structured interviews, we can assume that, overall, they come close to reflecting the general situation.

2.1. Online survey of “new communities” activists: characteristics of the survey audience

To better understand the characteristics of the audience that participated in the survey, we will describe its main characteristics.

The overwhelming majority (79.8%) of those who took part in the survey live in Belarus. Only 2.3% of respondents permanently reside in another country and another 5.9% of respondents left the country during the period of repression in 2020-2021.

Table 2.1. Country of residence of survey respondents

| Do you live now in Belarus or in another country? | % |
|---|------|
| I live in Belarus | 79,8 |
| I left the country at the time of the 2020-21 repressions | 5,9 |
| I reside permanently in another country | 2,3 |
| No response | 12,1 |

Among those who live permanently in another country or left during the period of repression, the largest number of respondents are living in Poland, Germany and Ukraine. Most of those who responded that they live in Belarus are residents of Minsk (68.6%), with only a few representing small towns (1.9%) and with other types of settlements represented about equally (8-10% of the total).

⁸ The survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey and invitations to participate were disseminated through Telegram channels and social networks. Most respondents who filled out the questionnaire are likely subscribers to the “Honest People” initiative channel, which supported this survey, and the “Motolko, Help” Telegram channel.

Table 2.2. Distribution of respondents living in Belarus by type of community

| Where do you live (permanently or most of the time)? (n = 529) | % |
|--|------|
| In a village, agro-town, or settlement | 10,4 |
| In a small town | 1,9 |
| In a city that is a district capital | 9,8 |
| In a city that is a regional capital | 8,1 |
| In Minsk | 68,6 |
| I do not want to answer | 0,8 |
| No response | 0,4 |

Aside from Minsk, the Minsk region is the second most represented in the total (15.5%), whereas respondents from other regions were less well represented.

Table 2.3. Distribution of respondents living in Belarus by region

| In which region of Belarus do you live? (n=529) | % |
|---|------|
| Brest region | 3,8 |
| Vitebsk region | 4,2 |
| Gomel region | 2,1 |
| Grodno region | 4,7 |
| Minsk region | 15,5 |
| Mogilev region | 1,5 |
| Minsk region | 66,7 |
| I do not want to answer this question | 0,8 |
| No response | 0,8 |

Most respondents are people aged 25 to 54 (72.7% of the total) who represent the economically active segment of society.

Table 2.4. Distribution of respondents by age

| Age | % |
|-------------|------|
| 16-24 | 3,5 |
| 25-39 | 44,3 |
| 40-54 | 28,4 |
| 55-75 | 6,8 |
| No response | 17,0 |

Males were slightly overrepresented (at least those who responded to this question).

Table 2.5. Distribution of respondents by gender

| Gender of respondents | % |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Male | 49,3 |
| Female | 36,2 |
| I do not want to answer this question | 2,0 |
| No response | 12,5 |

Among respondents, a significant majority were people with higher or postgraduate education (73.9% of respondents).

Table 2.6. Distribution of respondents by level of education

| What is your level of education? | % |
|--|------|
| Primary, incomplete secondary | 0,2 |
| Secondary (grades 10-11) | 2,9 |
| Professional/technical | 3,2 |
| Specialized secondary (technical school) | 6,5 |
| Higher | 64,4 |
| Postgraduate | 9,5 |
| I do not want to answer this question | 0,9 |
| No response | 12,5 |

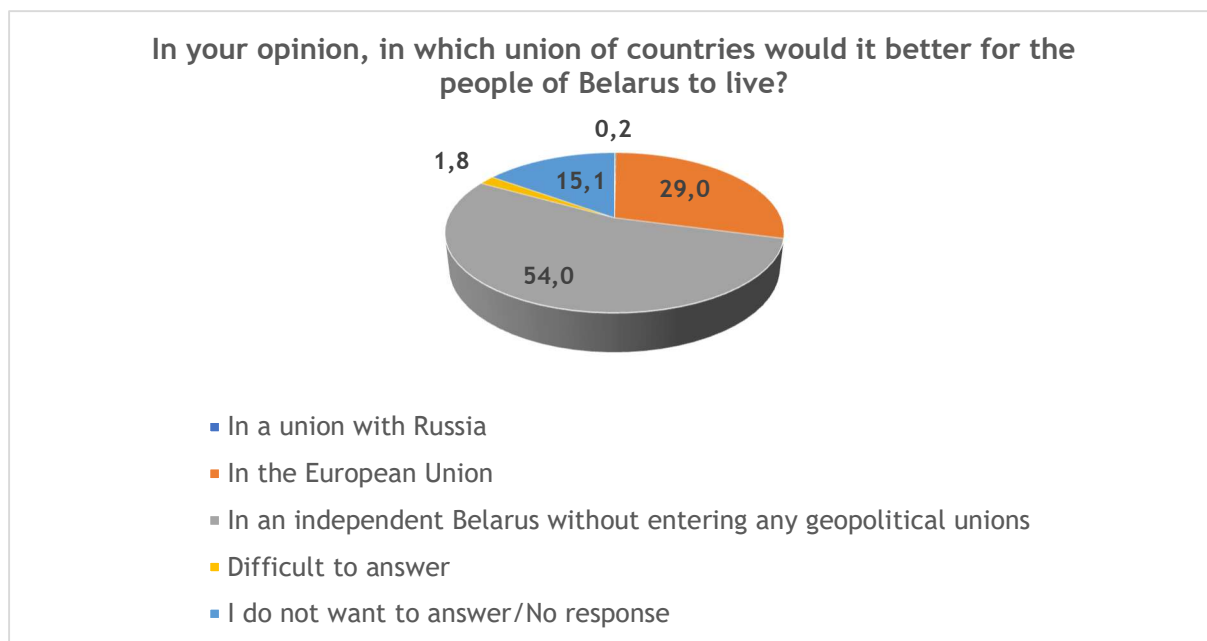
The private sector is much more represented than the state in the survey, with slightly more than 60% of respondents either working in private businesses/organizations or who run their own business, are individual entrepreneurs, etc. 8.9% are freelancers.

Table 2.7. Distribution of respondents by occupation

| Which of the following applies to you (you can choose more than one): | % |
|---|------|
| I work for a state-owned company/organization | 15,4 |
| I work at a private company/organization | 41,6 |
| I have my own business | 19,5 |
| Freelancer | 8,9 |
| I study at a school, technical school, or university | 1,4 |
| I work at a non-profit organization | 1,1 |
| Currently unemployed | 6,2 |
| Retired | 4,4 |
| I do not want to answer this question | 2,4 |

Most of respondents (54%) believe that the best option for Belarus is not to join any geopolitical alliances, whereas 29% are supporters of the European Union. There were practically no supporters of an alliance with Russia among respondents (0.2%).

Fig. 2.1. Geopolitical orientation of respondents



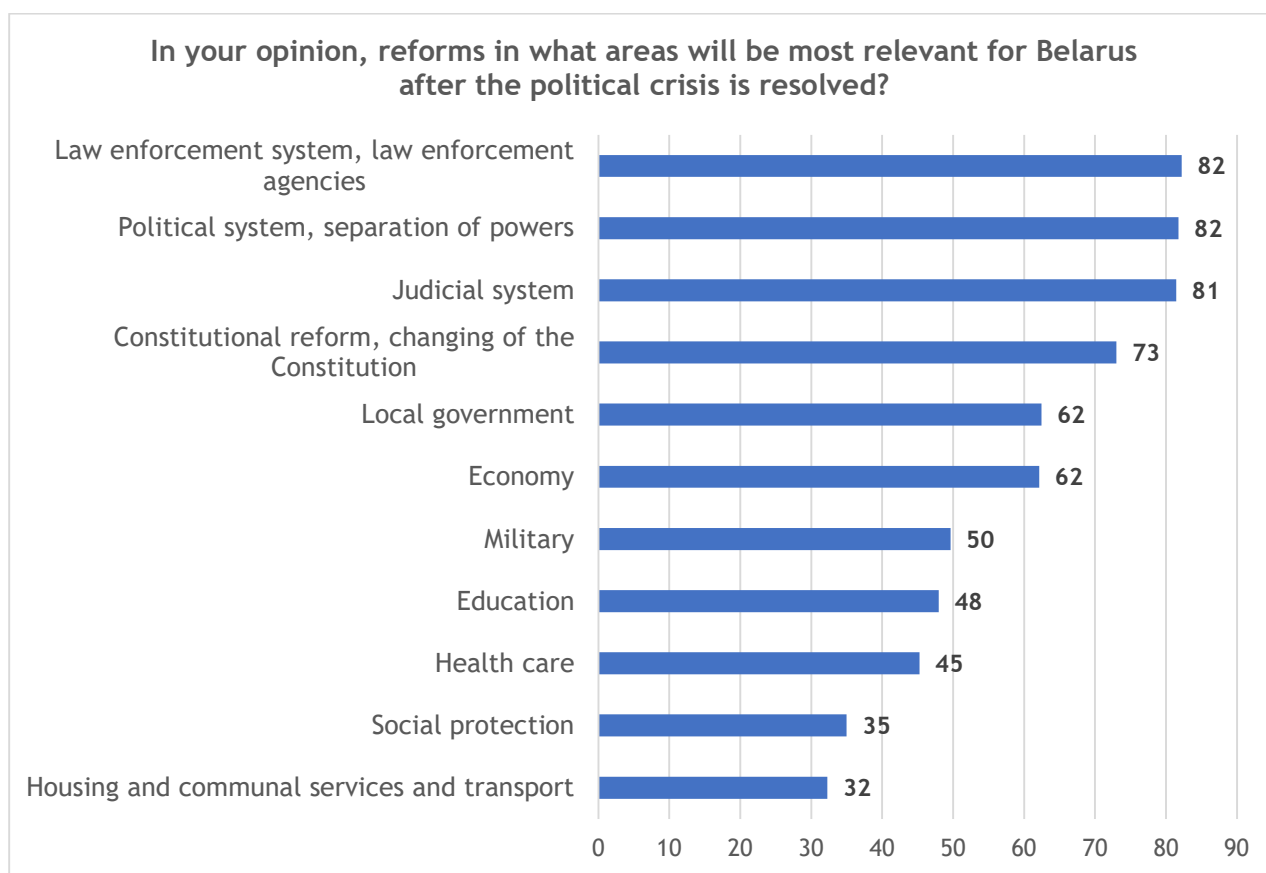
Survey respondents demonstrate a very low level of adherence to the attitudes characteristic of Belarusian state policy in various areas in the past period. The most “popular” turned out to be feelings about free medical care, albeit with a loss of quality. However, this is shared by only 6.9% of activists of the “new communities” surveyed. A significant majority (77.2%) do not support any of the standpoints traditional for the state policy of the previous period.

Table 2.8. Perception of different attitudes

| Do you agree with the following statements? | % |
|--|------|
| It is better to have a lower salary if employment is guaranteed | 1,8 |
| It is better to have average medical care if it is free | 6,9 |
| It is better to assign compulsory work to graduates than to leave them unemployed | 0,6 |
| It is better to work in a state-owned company than in a private one | 0,5 |
| It is better that Belarusian companies earn smaller profits than to be bought up by foreigners | 4,5 |
| Do not agree with any of the statements | 77,2 |

Finally, an assessment of the relevance of reforms in various spheres after the resolution of the political crisis shows how serious the question of the political structure generally is for activists of the “new communities” surveyed, with the top three reforms including the reform of the political, law enforcement and judicial systems. These are followed by a slight margin by the amending of the Constitution (73% of the respondents assess it as the most relevant).

Fig. 2.2. Assessing the relevance of reforms in various sectors, %



The spheres of reform that traditionally occupied the first positions in public polls in Belarus (housing and communal services, social protection, education and health care) were at the bottom of the list of priorities of respondents in this study, although they are recognized as essential by a high proportion of activists of the “new communities.”

2.2. Emergence and current state of “new communities”

In Belarus, for many reasons, local communities are underdeveloped and are not actors in the implementation of local self-government, and even less so at higher levels of government or public policy. However, in the process of organizing protests, associations of neighbors, courtyards, districts, cities and villages quickly began to form. The initial impetus for such self-organization was coming together for protests, collecting signatures to protest the election results, launching procedures to recall deputies, etc. However, by September 2020 the agenda

and set of activities of these “new communities” began to expand. The so-called “courtyard meetings” were widespread, especially in Minsk, where neighbors organized events in different formats in their yards, from joint tea parties to lectures, concerts and theater performances. A kind of struggle for semiotic space took place, with the decorating of courtyards and streets with flags and white-red-white ribbons, graffiti, murals, etc. The political agenda began to be supplemented by issues of improvement of public services, solving common problems for the district or city, environment - that is, a “traditional” agenda for local communities.

It is difficult to assess the scale of this process, especially given that the authorities reacted quickly and aggressively in suppressing all these types of activity. We can only work from some indirect data, for example, the active use of local Telegram chats, which played an important role in the formation of “new communities.” At the beginning of September 2020, a catalog site and an interactive map of local Telegram groups (chats) “dze.chat - razmova z susedziami”⁹ was created, where you could easily find chats of courtyards and districts throughout Belarus and communities in other countries for Belarusians abroad. By the end of September, more than 1000 chats were included, and the number of non-unique users was about 550,000¹⁰. This figure cannot be translated directly to offline “courtyard” activity, but it can be assumed that it roughly reflects the scale of the process of mobilizing Belarusian society.

At the very beginning of the protest movement, there were reports of strikes at some businesses and strike committees began to form. The strike movement was quickly suppressed, an attempt at the end of October 2020 to organize a nationwide strike failed and most active participants in the strike committees fell under repression and were fired from their jobs. In parallel with the forming of strike committees and attempts to organize strikes at businesses and organizations, the process of leaving “official” trade unions and the creation of new groups of independent trade unions also began. This process did not have mass appeal and the head organizations formed found themselves in a position of “semi-legality,”¹¹ immediately falling under repression. Nevertheless, some of the primary organizations created on the wave of the protests are continuing their work, even in those cases where activists were fired from businesses. The data from the interviews show that (at least as early as the summer of 2021) the “primary organizations” cooperated actively with each other and tried to develop their groups and pull together capacity. Some of this activity later became part of the Rabochy Rukh initiative¹².

During the development of the protests, various groups appeared that were distinguished by their socio-demographic characteristics: gender or age, profession or

⁹ On October 18, 2021, it became known that the Ministry of Internal Affairs recognized the site as an “extremist formation” // <https://dev.by/news/2ef>

¹⁰ Local Telegram groups (chats) in summer-autumn 2020: dynamics of activity and content of communication // https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2020_TG_Belarus-II.pdf

¹¹ On the one hand, the existence of independent trade unions made it possible to create primary organizations from some existing trade unions at businesses, but they could not register, often because it was impossible to find a legal address.

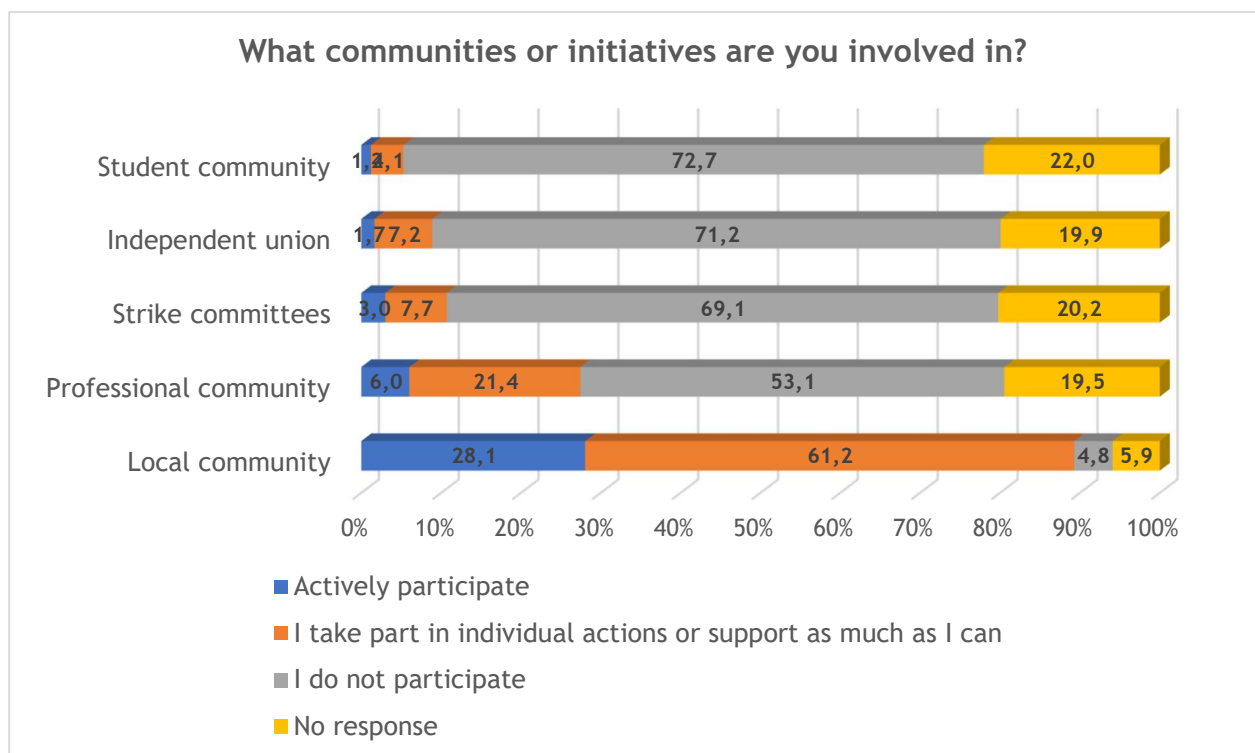
¹² In September 2021, several Rabochy Rukh activists were arrested and on October 18 it became known that the KGB had declared Rabochy Rukh an “extremist formation” // <https://dev.by/news/2ef>

occupation. Some of them continued to exist after the end of the active phase of the protests and they continue to remain in contact and are looking for new forms of activity. Many of the chats are closed or private, but there are also open ones, for example, the White Scrubs (Beliye khalaty) chat (recognized as extremist on 10/04/2021), the Belarusian Railway Workers' Community (recognized as extremist on 10/05/2021), the group Pensioners 97% and others.

Often, people who are actively involved in the transformation process are members of not one but several communities and support a variety of initiatives, both general for the country and at the local level. Among the activists surveyed of the “new communities,” only a little more than a third (37%) participate in the activities of only one community, whereas 39.4% of respondents noted two different types of communities in which they either take an active part or support from time to time. 23.6% are to some extent included in the activity of three or more communities of different types.

In general, the picture of survey respondent’s participation in community activities of different types is as follows (see Fig. 2.3).

Fig. 2.3. Involvement of respondents in the activities of communities of different types



The most common activity among respondents is participation in the activities of local communities. This is confirmed by the response to the next question, where we asked to identify the most significant community for the respondent to which they devote the most time and energy. Three quarters of respondents named the local community as such.

Table 2.9. Identification with communities of different types

| If you are a member of more than one community, please indicate which is the most important for you (to which do you devote the most time and energy)? | % |
|--|------|
| Local community (neighborhood, "courtyard," urban or rural) | 75,4 |
| An independent trade union at a company, organization, or university | 1,7 |
| Strikes at a company, organization, or university | 2,3 |
| Professional community, uniting people of the same occupation or profession | 7,5 |
| Student community | 0,9 |
| Other | 11,6 |
| No response | 0,6 |

Among the “other” groups - that is, other types of communities not identified in the questionnaire - are mentioned communities and chats of pensioners, the “partisan movement,” “resistance movement,” *samizdat*, the “Gathering” initiative, various civic initiatives and “communities of like-minded people.”

Most respondents joined the activities of new communities in August-September 2020. Based on the survey data, we can say that the positive dynamics, although gradually weakening, persisted until the end of 2020, and then essentially disappeared. This is confirmed by the data of semi-structured interviews, in which activists say that after a violent surge in late summer and early autumn until the end of 2020, despite the unfolding repressions, slow growth continued, or at least the renewal of communities with new people, and after the New Years a process of stagnation began.

Table 2.10. The emergence of “new communities” and the inclusion of respondents in their activities

| | How long has your community or initiative existed? (%) | For how long have you taken part in this community or initiative's activities? (%) |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Before May 2020 | 6,3 | 5,9 |
| Since May-July 2020 | 8,4 | 9,0 |
| Since August 2020 | 43,3 | 38,8 |
| Since September 2020 | 22,2 | 23,4 |
| Since October-December 2020 | 12,1 | 16,4 |
| Since January-March 2021 | 0,8 | 3,0 |
| Since April-May 2021 | 0,9 | 1,8 |
| I do not know, cannot say for certain | 5,6 | 1,5 |

| | | |
|-------------|-----|-----|
| No response | 0,5 | 0,2 |
|-------------|-----|-----|

An analysis of semi-structured interviews with activists shows that there is a common logic in the development of “new communities” that is characteristic for their different types.

1. August-September 2020 - *Explosive growth*. On the wave of mobilization, any ideas that could support the protest movement were picked up, many new people came, and various forms of activity were implemented. At this stage, connections were quickly built, and the level of trust among those who were involved in the protest movement generally and the activity of the “new communities” particularly rose sharply.

2. October-December 2020 - *Inertial development*. Participation in street protests gradually became routine, the agenda developed from the protests and aimed at a quick resolution of the political crisis to include issues of organizing local self-government, improvement of public services, protection of the rights of certain groups, etc. Relations with other communities, exchange of experience and ideas, and the planning and implementation of joint actions developed further.

3. January-March 2021 - *Crystallization and structuring*. The level of repression persisted, but the number of people involved in “new communities” decreased due to burnout and loss of faith in change, among other factors. Ensuring the safety of community members and activities required more and more effort. Forms of activity that could be realized “while remaining within the framework of the law” were sought. Actions became more “economical” as human resources became more and more limited. At the same time, roles began to be distributed among those who continued to be active, a need for planning activities was recognized as was the need for thinking through plans for the development of the community itself.

4. April-July 2021 (presumably, this trend continues) - *Survival and “partisan activities.”* The continuation of repressions and the lack of positive changes generally led to having most communities’ activities go underground. Since almost any independent activity is persecuted, regardless of its nature, the search for safe forms of activity has lost its significance. Much effort was spent on ensuring security, planning and assisting those who were repressed. Ties grew among those who left Belarus and some of those who were forced to leave the country continued to maintain active positions in communities, working on things that could be performed remotely and that were potentially dangerous for those who remained in country (for example, administering Telegram chats, maintaining websites, etc.). A search for forms of action that could be implemented by communities to keep them from falling apart was undertaken with the hope of continuing joint activities. In the absence of clear prospects for a general change in the situation, the main value became the preservation of ties and potential for the community itself along with seeking opportunities for expansion.

The data from the activist survey show that the most common forms of activity in the summer of 2021 were actions aimed at material (64.9%) and symbolic (62.9%) support for

political prisoners and their families. These were followed by activities aimed at strengthening ties between neighbors (52.5%), actions for local improvement of public services (42.8%), outreach work, and involving people in the community or initiative (41.6%). These three types of actions can be considered directly or indirectly as aimed at strengthening ties on a local scale at home, in courtyards or in districts.

Another active area is information and work: distribution of leaflets, newspapers, various *samizdat* (49.8%) and maintaining public pages and channels in Telegram or other social networks (32.3%).

Table 2.11. Forms of activity conducted by “new communities” in the last three months (i.e., March-May 2021)

| What areas or forms of activity have been conducted in the last three months by your community or initiative? | % |
|---|----------|
| Material support for people or their families who have come under pressure or repression in connection with their civic position (financial assistance, food, parcels for those arrested or detained, etc.) | 64,9 |
| Solidarity actions and support for political prisoners or those under pressure | 62,9 |
| Events and activities aimed at strengthening ties among neighbors, community building, etc. | 52,5 |
| Distribution of leaflets, newspapers, etc. | 49,8 |
| Activities aimed at improving your apartment building, courtyard, or district | 42,8 |
| Outreach involving people in the community or initiative | 41,6 |
| Appeals to government agencies through letters, petitions, and statements regarding the general political situation | 33,9 |
| Maintaining public pages, Telegram channels, or other social networks | 32,3 |
| Activities aimed at solving the problems of your own city, town, or village | 17,5 |
| Appeals, correspondence, meetings with government bodies and officials regarding significant social problems (changes in legislation, law enforcement practice, etc.) | 15,1 |
| Organization of educational events for community or initiative members | 14,0 |
| Appeals, correspondence, and meetings with deputies at all levels | 13,4 |
| Coordinating collegial bodies of territorial public self-government (KOTOS) or other forms of local self-government | 7,2 |
| Protection of rights of workers at companies or organizations, of students, etc. | 5,1 |
| Communication with local authorities on the issues involving spending local budgets, decisions, etc. | 3,5 |
| Difficult to answer | 1,8 |

Among the forms of cooperation with the authorities of any level, the most common have been appeals to state bodies with letters, petitions and statements regarding the general

political situation. Direct forms of communication (correspondence or meetings with officials and deputies) on local issues were much less common and communication with local authorities on their decision making was essentially nonexistent.

The irrelevance of the question of building cooperation with local authorities was repeatedly emphasized by activists during semi-structured interviews. If even in the fall-winter of 2020 there were hopes for the legalization of community activities (organization of KOTOS, registration of public associations or primary branches of trade unions, etc.), then by the time of the study (May-July 2021), almost all our interlocutors noted that there was no longer any hope for this. Moreover, the presence of a legal status is no longer seen as a factor that expands opportunities and makes activities safe.

During interviews, “disappointment” about communication with local authorities was noted. If at the initial stages such communication was conducted by activists to achieve a solution to certain problems, now it is more likely used to keep up pressure and maintain their own positions, even though it becomes more and more unsafe to do so.

In the online survey, more than 40% of respondents answered that in the short term they do not plan to interact with local authorities in any form, 21% intended to continue pressure on local authorities to change the situation in the country or their city and 8.9% intend to exercise public control over their activities. Only 1.4% of respondents expect to receive support from local authorities.

Table 2.12. Assessment of the prospects for cooperation between “new communities” and local authorities

| What areas of work with local authorities is being conducted or will be implemented soon by your community or initiative? | % |
|--|----------|
| We are not planning on interacting with local authorities in the near future | 41,8 |
| Pressure on local authorities to change the situation in the country or city | 21,0 |
| Exercising public oversight over the activities of local authorities | 8,9 |
| Obtaining permits and legalizing those activities and reforms that we initiate | 8,3 |
| Establishing cooperation and participation in local authorities' events and initiatives | 4,1 |
| Obtaining registration of our initiative or organization | 4,1 |
| Obtaining administrative or financial support from local governments | 1,4 |
| Difficult to answer | 22,9 |

Among the new directions or forms of activity that “new communities” activists plan on implementing soon (the question was posed openly, and 111 responses were received), a relatively high number of responses touched on radicalization, a “partisan” approach and participation in political events (referendum) or campaigns (the “Peramoga” plan). Others were roughly similar types of actions, with the most common response being to “keep doing what we

are doing” (24 responses) and the third most common as “I would like to see new forms, but it is not clear where I can get them” (13 responses).

| |
|---|
| Continue to do what we are doing (24 responses out of 111) |
| Organization of protest actions and “partisanship”: white-red-white ribbons, clothes, graffiti (15) |
| I would like to see new forms and initiatives, but what to do is not clear (13) |
| Information, propaganda and educational outreach: leaflet printing, website development, podcasts, systematization and dissemination of information (9) |
| Development of society itself in connection with other communities (8) |
| Assistance to political prisoners (8) |
| Dissemination of information and participation in the realization of the “Peramoga” plan (7) |
| Improvement of public services, charity, organizing holidays, competitions and discussions (6) |
| Actions related to communication with or pressure on officials or attempts to change legislation (6) |
| Radical actions (6) |
| Development of local government, KOTOS or city legislation (3) |
| Economic pressure and boycotting sales (3) |
| Active participation in political events (constitutional referendum, local elections) and in institutions (3) |

When assessing the prospects for the development of their community (the question was posed openly and 234 more or less detailed answers were received), activists often associate these prospects with the development of the political situation in the country generally. Sometimes this connection is formulated extremely radically, for example, “if the government changes, the community will develop, if not, it will disappear” (17 responses). For some activists, a change in the political situation is not a question of the community’s survival, but the point is that will lead to a change in its activities, the emergence of new work (21 responses) or self-dissolution (“We will continue until there is victory and after that there will be no sense in having a community” - 21 responses).

There are quite a few optimistic forecasts (“the community will develop, the number of members will increase, and it will become more active” - 45 responses; “the community will become the basis for the development of this or that form of self-government, public association, etc.” - 42 responses). There are fewer pessimistic forecasts, which can be divided into two types: “activity and the number of participants will decrease due to repressions” - 10 responses; and “everyone who did not leave will be jailed soon and the community will disappear” - 20 responses. Some activists see a transition to more radical forms of action as one possibility (10 responses). However, the most frequent type of answers captures the total uncertainty of the situation in which “no one knows what will happen tomorrow or in a year” (48 responses).

2.3. Cooperation with other actors

An important condition for the development of communities formed on the wave of political mobilization is the development of ties with other actors, initiatives and organizations. The activists themselves understand the need to build such connections, and this became especially acute when the first mobilization impulse began to decline, and the energy of the general movement decreased. It then became necessary to think over actions more clearly and to look for possible forms of action and ideas and means of their realization.

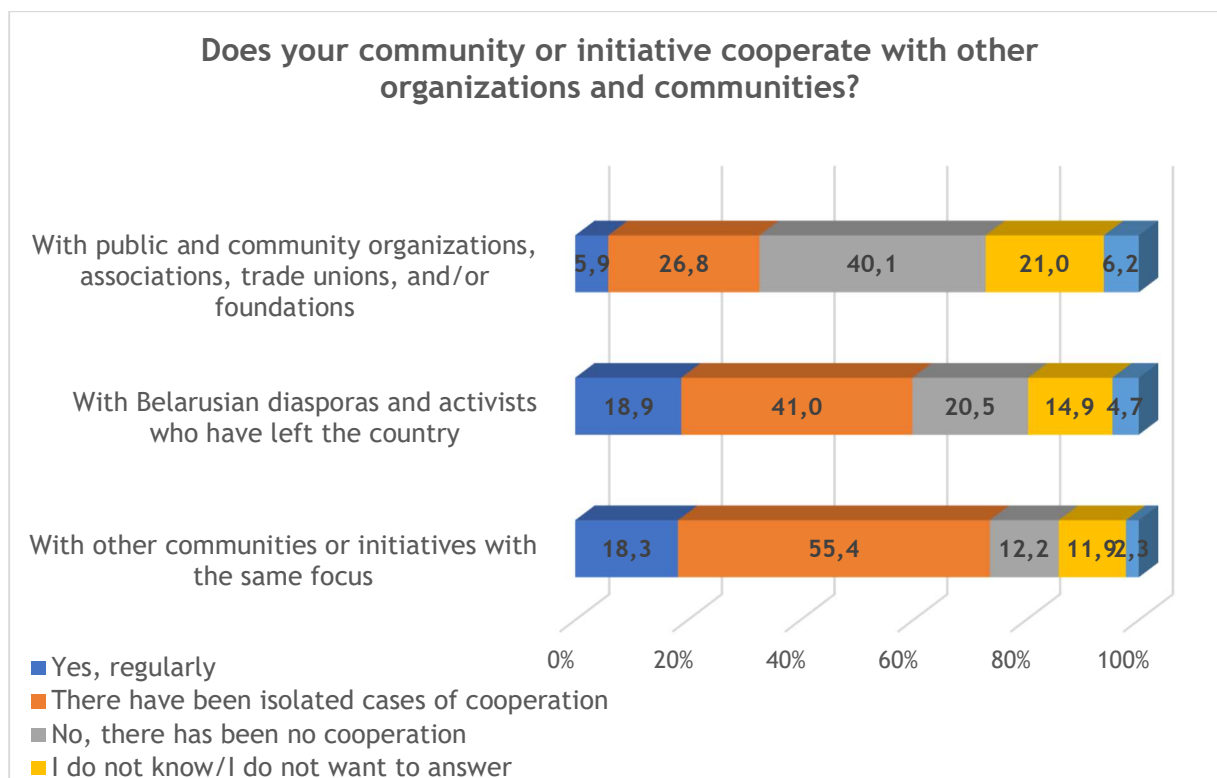
Establishing ties among “new communities” began rapidly. In September, local communities began to hold separate joint actions and events. With the crystallization of local communities and the challenges arising in implementing activities, it became more difficult to develop these ties and the need for ensuring security and secrecy increased. It has become too dangerous to organize joint actions, so this type of activity has declined, but activists from local communities exchange ideas, advise each other or help find locate specialists. In addition, communication with other communities serves as a form of psychological support.

Relations were quickly established between the strike committees and the groups of independent trade unions, which gradually built a system of constant communication, exchange of news, plans, successful cases, mutual consultation, etc.

In interviews with “new communities” activists, the importance of staying connected with people who have been forced to leave the country but continue to perform important functions in the community was often emphasized.

The online poll of activists confirms this, although it shows that the connections described are most likely not very stable. The presence of regular interaction with communities of their own type and with Belarusian diasporas or activists who have left the country was noted by less than a fifth of the respondents. However, there are not many who do not cooperate at all (12.2% and 20.5%, respectively). Most often these are one-time, isolated cases of cooperation.

Fig. 2.4. Level of cooperation with other communities and CSOs



The connections between “new communities” and civil society organizations are much weaker. An analysis of interviews with activists shows that they do not always clearly understand what “public organizations” are. That is, there is no “third sector” as such either in their thesaurus or in their views. People learn about public organizations most often when a community activist is also a member of a public organization, or the community has joined in some programs, educational events or other initiatives that public organizations offer on relevant topics. Among respondents to the online survey, only 5.9% noted the presence of regular cooperation with public organizations and another quarter (26.8%) talk about individual cases of interaction.

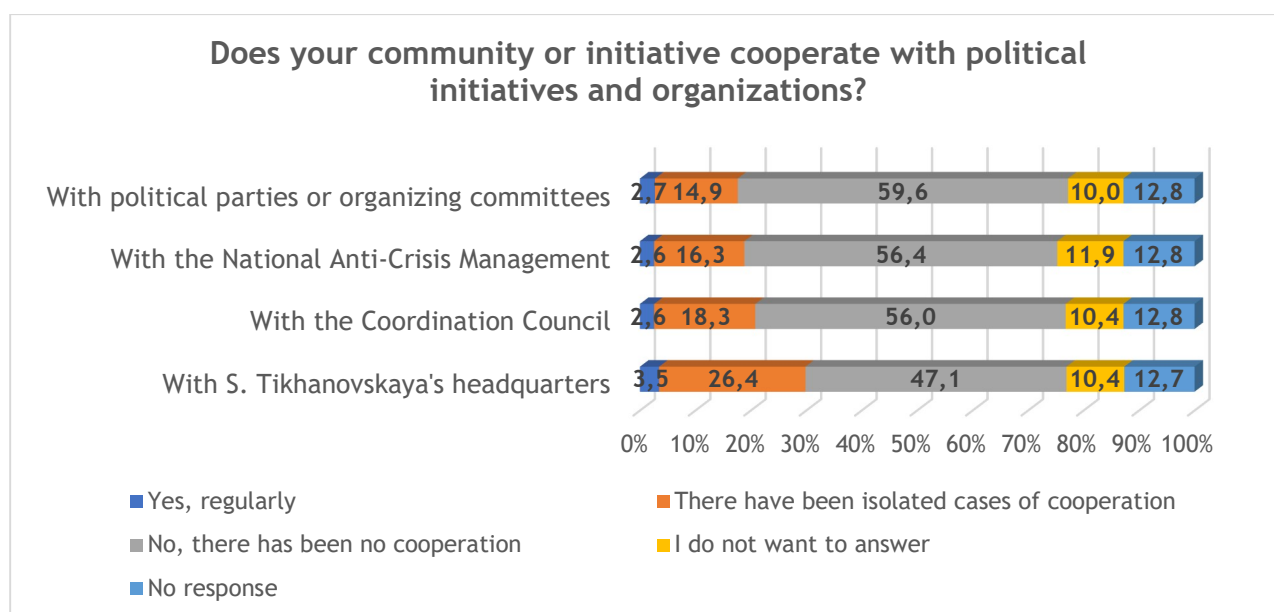
The intensity of cooperation with other communities and public organizations is lowest among local communities. Regular interaction with communities of their type was noted by 15.9% of respondents who represent local communities, while among activists of professional, student communities and trade unions this indicator is almost twice as high (29.6%). The situation is similar with cooperation among diasporas and activists who have left the country (18% of representatives of local communities and 26.3% of representatives of professional, student communities and trade unions regularly interact with them) and with public organizations (3.6% and 12.7%, respectively).

The level of interaction of “new communities” with political actors is also low. The most frequent and regular interaction is conducted with the headquarters of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya,

3.5% of respondents indicated regular cooperation and another 26.4% indicated this is true for individual cases. Still, almost half (47.1%) of respondents noted that their community has never dealt with Tikhanovskaya’s headquarters and the level of cooperation with other political organizations (Coordination Council, NAM and political parties) is even lower.

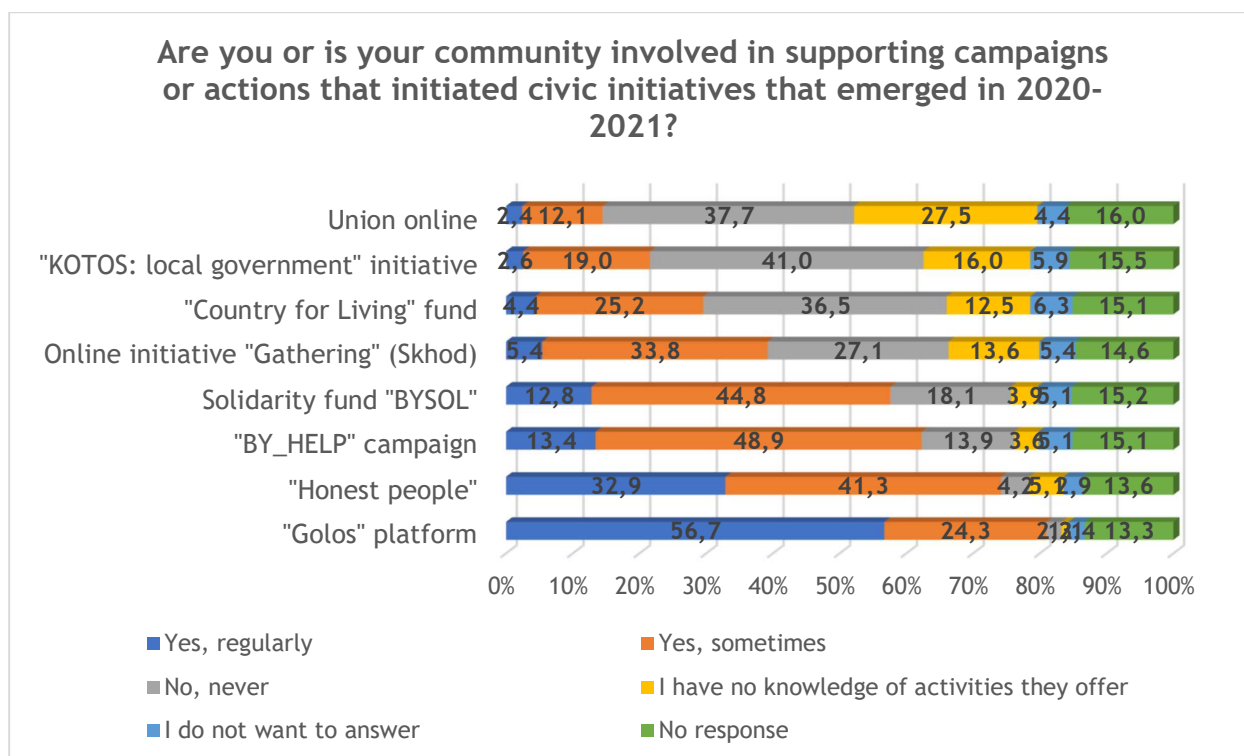
It is interesting that relative to cooperation with political actors, there is essentially no difference between different types of communities - for all of them it is equally low.

Fig. 2.5. Level of interaction of “new communities” with political initiatives and organizations



An important role in the protest movement continues to be played by civic initiatives that were launched before the elections or in the post-election period. These consistently perform many infrastructure functions, initiate various campaigns and conduct outreach and awareness-raising work. The platform “Golos” and the “Honest People” initiative enjoy the broadest support among “new communities” activists surveyed, who indicated they regularly or sometimes support campaigns or actions that they initiate - 81% and 74.2% of respondents, respectively. In second place are campaigns to collect aid for victims of repression, specifically the BY_HELP campaign and the BYSOL Solidarity Fund, which enjoy similar levels of support.

Fig. 2.6. Level of support by “new communities” activists for various civic campaigns and initiatives



At the same time, activists of communities of different types (local, professional, student, trade unions and strike committees) essentially do not differ from each other in terms of their level of involvement in various campaigns and actions, with the exception of such “substantive” initiatives as KOTOS, which has significant support from activists local communities, and Trade Union Online, whose campaigns and actions include more activists from independent trade unions and strike committees.

2.4 Main problems and needs of “new communities”

The main problems in the development of “new communities” are the high degree of repression against active citizens and people’s associated refusal to participate in activities due to fear, fatigue and loss of faith in changing the situation. An equally important problem for “new communities” activists is the lack of understanding of what to do currently to move towards achieving common goals. We note the high importance of this problem, which, both during interviews and the online survey, turned out to be essentially at the same level in importance with the problem of repression and pressure on community members.

At the same time, the absence of political leaders who could set the course for the general movement is perceived as a problem to a much lesser extent. Only 25.5% of survey respondents noted it as such and during the interview it was not formulated as a problem at all. This situation can be interpreted in at least two ways.

First, there is the initial decentralization and “horizontal” nature of the protest movement persists. Political leaders, their headquarters and other institutionalized structures are still perceived as part of a general movement in which everyone takes some action, but there is practically no hierarchy, coordination or management.

The second interpretation belongs more to the field of social psychology. During interviews with “new communities” activists, negative attitudes toward leadership as such were often and clearly manifested. In this respect, there is a kind of “trauma” towards the personalistic type of government in Belarus. Even at the level of their communities, people do not want to talk about leadership. They seek to emphasize the equality of all participants, the voluntary nature of support for any initiative, and the lack of leadership and authoritative power.

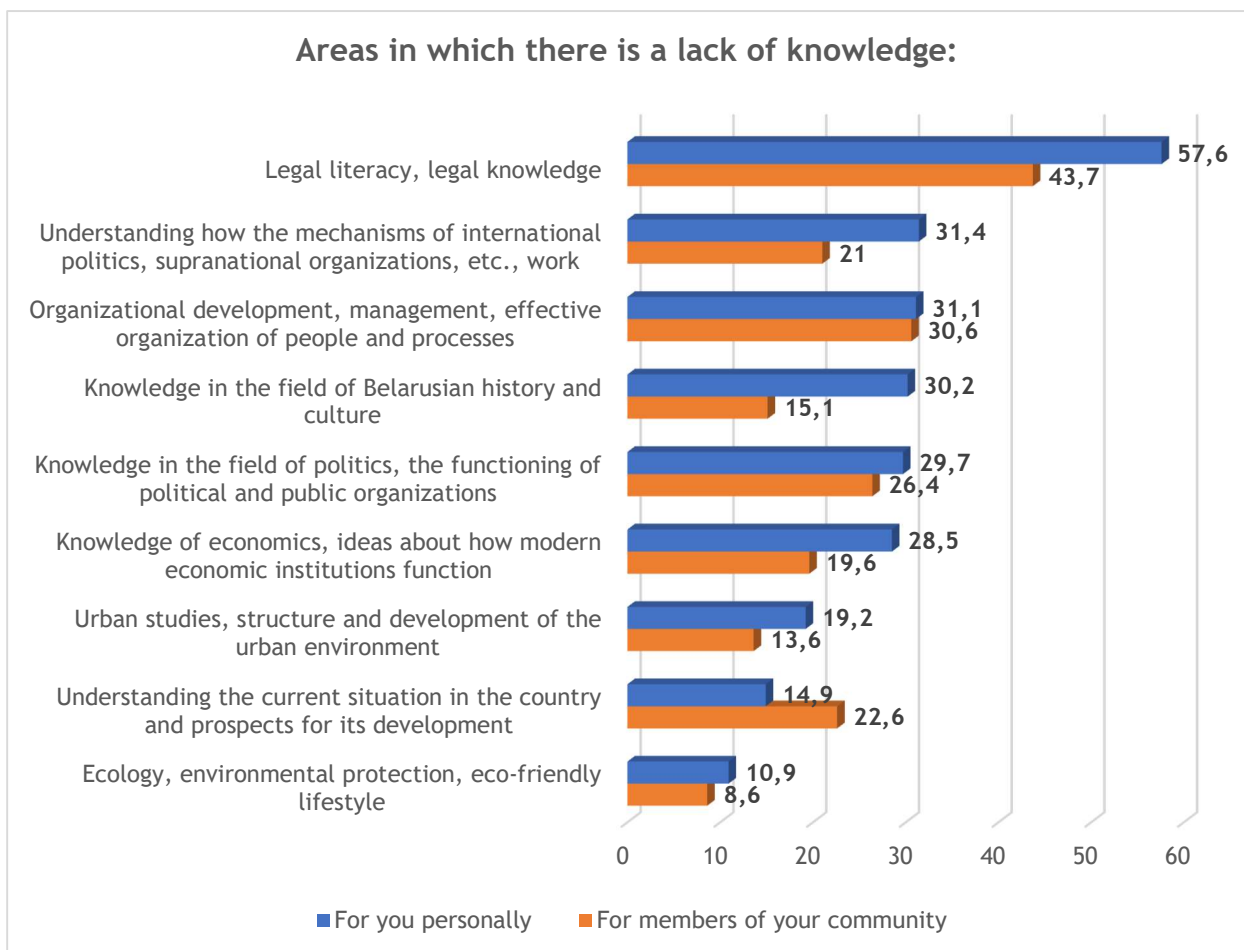
Table 2.13. Assessing the relevance of the problems faced by “new communities” activists

| What are the main problems your community or initiative are facing today? | % |
|---|----------|
| Pressure and repression of participants | 63,3 |
| It is difficult to understand what exactly needs to be done now to achieve common goals | 62,9 |
| There are fewer active people in the community, people are leaving (due to fear, disappointment, etc.) | 59,6 |
| It is impossible to find safe ways to work | 49,6 |
| Obstacles to activities set by government officials, local authorities, company administrations, etc. | 40,3 |
| Lack of influx of new people | 37,3 |
| Absence or lack of coordination with other similar communities | 30,0 |
| There are no political leaders who can say clearly what to do | 25,5 |
| Lack of necessary community or initiative participant knowledge and competencies | 16,7 |
| Lack of financial resources | 13,7 |
| Difficulties with registration of organizations (KOTOS, trade union groups, public organizations or another form), acquiring legal status | 9,4 |
| Difficulties in communication conflicts among participants | 6,3 |
| Difficult to answer | 2,1 |
| We are not facing any issues | 0,6 |

The “new communities” activists consider the problems of coordination with other communities, lack of competencies, and knowledge and lack of financial resources to be less significant. The issue of acquiring legal status, registration, etc., is essentially irrelevant. The rating of problems that concern “new communities” activists shows that most are really in a situation of survival, having very limited opportunities for action, and most importantly, with no ideas for development “here and now.”

Among the knowledge that, in the opinion of respondents, they and their community members lack, in the first place for demand are legal knowledge and legal literacy. (Note that during unstructured interviews in which there were no “prompts,” this was essentially the only area of knowledge that activists cited as in-demand.) About a third of respondents to the online survey lack understanding of the mechanisms of international politics, knowledge in the field of management, Belarusian history and culture, and the functioning of political and economic institutions.

Fig. 2.7. Assessment of the demand for knowledge in different spheres by “new communities” activists, %



In the area of practical skills, the most requested competences are those related to digital security, followed by resilience in stressful situations. This once again brings us back to understanding the high degree of pressure that activists of “new communities” experience. Competencies related to the possibility of expanding communities and movement to change the political situation in general then follow, including information and outreach work and identifying the interests and needs of potential community members.

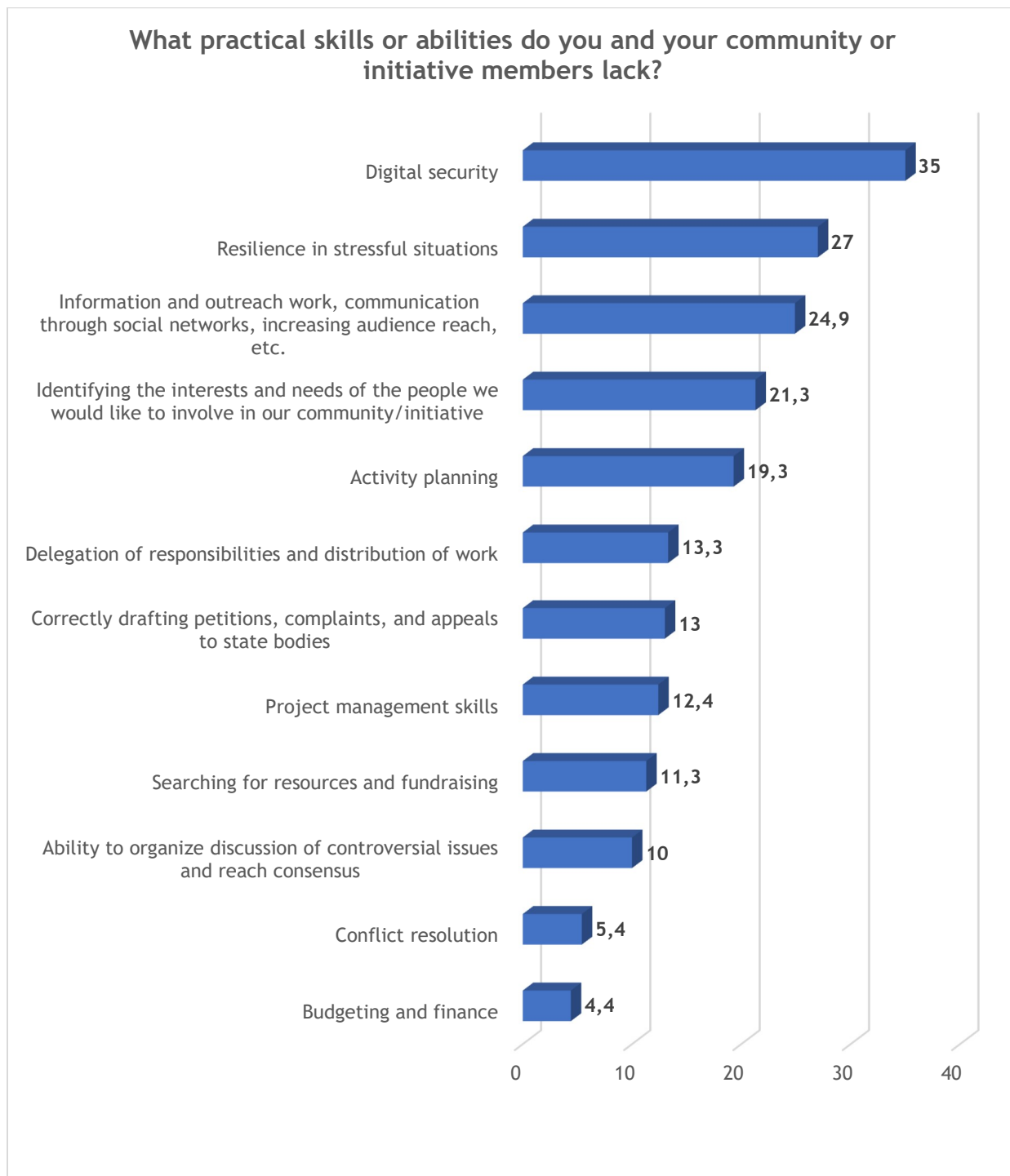
The demand for competencies related to project activities and fundraising is rather low. It must be admitted that we cannot be sure that all respondents understood what this question was regarding, since during the interviews the topics of project activities and fundraising very rarely came up.

The low significance of problems associated with difficulties in communication or conflicts between community members and the low demand for conflict resolution skills and the ability to organize discussion around sensitive topics should also be noted. Based on the results of the interviews, two factors could be cited that determine this approach to “non-conflict.”

The first is the extended nature of relations between community members, which essentially does not imply mutual obligations, leadership and structure, and is based on the principle of personal initiative. Anyone can propose their own course of action and some community members can support and join. In this sense, there is practically no basis for conflict, since common decisions are made extremely rarely and are typically associated with activities that may threaten other members of the community.

The second factor is the small number of active members of the “new communities,” a decrease in the number of participants and, at the same time, the strengthening of the connection between them, causing them to “run up against” each other. Most likely, until the activists of the “new communities” have access to wider audiences, they will not have the opportunity to organize large-scale processes that require coordination with a wide range of people (neighbors, colleagues and work groups), the issues of conflict mediation and the organization of discussions will not be relevant for them, as they will not be used in their daily activities.

Fig. 2.8. Assessment of the demand for new practical skills and competences by “new communities” activists, %



Among the types of assistance that “new communities” need, the most in-demand area is digital security. The demand for assistance in establishing contacts with other communities and establishing contacts with public organizations is also quite high. About a third of

respondents point to the need for psychological assistance, as well as assistance and guidance from human rights defenders on topics related to behavior in emergency situations and assistance to those who are subjected to reprisals. The same kind of requests were heard in unstructured interviews with “new communities” activists.

Table 2.14. Assessment of the demand for various forms of assistance and support by “new communities” activists

| What kind of assistance does your community or initiative need? | % |
|--|------|
| Information (digital) security | 50,4 |
| Forging connections with other communities or initiatives with the same focus | 45,7 |
| Psychological assistance and consultations (work with trauma, stress, and burnout) | 34,7 |
| Assistance and guidance from human rights defenders (how to conduct oneself when being searched or during interrogation, how to assist detainees or those convicted, etc.) | 33,9 |
| Establishing contacts with public and community organizations, associations, trade unions, and foundations that are engaged in various thematic areas | 27,1 |
| Organizational development (building an effective management system and organizing processes, defining goals and strategies for activities, etc.) | 24,1 |
| Legal assistance and consultations | 22,6 |
| Technical support (printing materials, equipment, finding meeting rooms, etc.) | 21,6 |
| Organization of interaction among activists and conflict mediation | 17,8 |
| Financial support | 17,2 |
| Establishing links and relationships with local authorities | 11,2 |
| Difficult to answer | 11,0 |
| We do not need assistance | 5,0 |

CONCLUSIONS

The political mobilization of 2020 gave rise to many social effects, one of which was the forming of new types of connections and relationships between people, specifically different types of proto-communities (professional, generational, local, etc.). This process, which unfolded *en masse* in August-September 2020, was quickly halted by tough repressions against activists and participants. The “new communities” that were able to survive and continue to operate now differ in character and self-determination. Some are purely “protest” communities that see their sole purpose as changing the situation in the country, whereas others see themselves as the basis of a future system of self-government.

In less than a year (from August 2020 to July 2021), “new communities” have gone from gathering people who united in the course of a protest movement through establishing stronger ties and looking for legal forms of action and a “positive” agenda for change in their field (local

government, protection of the rights of workers or students) to essentially clandestine groups that today are in survival mode and are under severe pressure from the regime.

The main forms of activity of the “new communities” in the spring and summer of 2021 were connected to helping political prisoners and their families while expanding their circle and media work. As political conditions have become more and more stringent since the summer of 2021 to the present, it is obvious that the tasks of survival and the forming of new “new communities” remain relevant.

Requests for new knowledge and skills of “new communities” activists are primarily related to the fields of law, legal literacy and security. Living under constant pressure also requires a system of psychological assistance and counseling/training on topics related to behavior in extreme situations (search, interrogation, arrest, etc.).

The main issue in the development of “new communities,” in addition to high levels of repression, is a lack of understanding of what to do currently to move towards achieving common goals and a lack of established ties with other actors. The strongest ties are those with communities of the same type and diasporas and activists who were forced to leave the country. The level of cooperation with CSOs and political centers is equally low. Moreover, it is the local (territorial) “new communities” that are most “atomized”; trade union, student and professional communities have a broader and more regular network of cooperation.

An important role for activists of the “new communities” continues to be played by civic initiatives that perform several infrastructural functions, including initiating various campaigns, carry out educational and awareness-raising work (the “Golos” platform, the “Honest People” initiative, the BY_HELP campaign, the BYSQL Solidarity Fund, etc.). The original decentralized and “horizontal” nature of those protesting is preserved where political centers and other institutionalized structures are perceived as part of a general movement in which everyone determines their own actions and where there is essentially no hierarchy, coordination and management.

3. NON-STATE MEDIA IN BELARUS IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL CRISIS

This part of the study briefly examines the change in the position of non-state media in the context of the political crisis in Belarus, the nature and level of repressions deployed against independent journalists and the media, and the main challenges and problems they face today. Given the unfolding information war, non-state media are forced to adapt very quickly, with these changes affecting almost all aspects of the way they operate, from changing business models, channels and ways of interacting with the audience, to their editorial policy and defining their role in the socio-political context.

The Belarusian media sphere has undergone significant changes in connection with the unfolding political crisis in Belarus. The information space today is one of the most important areas where the struggle for public opinion and consciousness unfolds. Internet media, social networks and instant messengers have gained the greatest influence in Belarus today. The role of television and radio, as well as of print media, has significantly decreased in recent years, and this is obvious even to the Belarusian regime, which, albeit with significant delay, began to actively use internet channels and platforms to create an information agenda and propaganda.

Within the framework of this study, we do not attempt to provide a complete description of the state of the situation in Belarusian media. Our task is to analyze the most important changes in the activities of non-state media and the challenges they face.

The empirical basis for this analysis, in addition to open sources and data from previous studies, is 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of non-state media: internet media, telegram channels, YouTube channels and blogs. With a small number of interviews, respondents included both experienced editors and journalists, as well as relatively new people in the field working within the country and abroad, media representatives with a broad socio-political agenda and those more “niche,” nationwide and regional. The interviews were conducted in June 2021. Even though in the following months there were many new events related to the situation of non-state media in the country, general trends in the development of the situation were already present at the time of the study.

3.1. Changes in the roles and positions of Belarusian non-state media in 2020-21

A change in the role of non-state media was evident even during the crisis associated with the coronavirus pandemic, during which the Belarusian regime chose a strategy of hushing up problems and hiding information. An indicator of this change is a significant redistribution of the level of public trust in favor of non-state media¹³, which actively participated in the search and provision of comprehensive information about the epidemiological situation to the

¹³ Belarusian society during the COVID-19 epidemic: response to the crisis (page 16) // https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2020_COVID-19_Opinion_poll_Belarus.pdf; “What motivates participants in street protests - research // <https://reform.by/184090-hto-motiviruet-uchastnikov-ulichnyh-akcij-issledovanie>

public, covered initiatives and actions aimed at collecting and providing assistance, and disseminated information about self-care measures.

During the social and political mobilization that unfolded in the spring-summer of 2020, along with non-state media, individual Telegram channels and YouTube blogs¹⁴, which began to gain popularity back in 2018-2019¹⁵, played an important role. Telegram's messenger has become such an important platform for disseminating information and organizing protest activity that the events of August 2020 began to be called the "Telegram Revolution."¹⁶

The period of the pre-election campaign and mass protests after the elections radically changed the position and role of non-state media in Belarus. In the wake of political mobilization (especially since August 2020), most of the media agenda was focused on political events. The state media have finally turned into a vehicle for propaganda, which is now being conducted in violation of not only journalistic standards and moral norms, but also existing legislation in Belarus. Non-state media that were involved in covering the post-election protests immediately came under severe pressure, which continues still in various forms.

The main forms of pressure on the media in the summer and fall of 2020 were website blocking and harassment of journalists who covered street protests. Very quickly, the status of a journalist ceased to be a protection, as journalists who worked on site began to be treated like ordinary participants in protests (or "illegal mass events"). They were detained and sentenced to administrative punishments, issued fines or given short prison sentences. The event that finally consolidated the "cancellation" of the status as a journalist was the criminal case brought against the Belsat journalists Darya Chultsova and Yekaterina Andreeva, who were streaming from a November 15 protest. The performance of their professional duties was equated to the organization of protest actions, and as a result they were sentenced to 2 years in prison. Another significant event demonstrating the attitude of the authorities towards independent journalism was the "0 ppm" case, in which TUT.BY journalist Katerina Andreeva was sentenced to 6 months in prison for publishing truthful information on the Roman Bondarenko case.

On October 2, 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus announced the introduction of a new regulation on the accreditation of journalists from foreign publications, which supposedly was to facilitate the procedure for obtaining accreditation. As a result,

¹⁴ Herasimenka, Aliaksandr, Tetyana Lokot, Olga Onuch, and Mariëlle Wijermars. "There's more to Belarus's 'Telegram Revolution' than a cellphone app." *Washington Post* 11 (2020).

¹⁵ Marples, David R. "Stalin's Ghosts, Parasites, and Pandemic: The Roots of the 2020 Uprising in Belarus: 2021 Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies." *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 1, no. aop (2021): 1-22.

¹⁶ See "Telegram messenger as a means of communication and self-organization in the context of political crisis in Belarus" // <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2020/11/27/messendzher-telegram-kak-sredstvo-kommunikatsii-i.html>

however, all accreditations in force at that time were canceled¹⁷, and most requests from independent media for new ones were not fulfilled¹⁸.

Pressure and repression were directed not only against media representatives, but also against bloggers, and administrators of Telegram channels and chats. As a result of arrests and the blocking and hacking of channels, most of the popular bloggers and today's leading Telegram channels were forced to leave the country and continue their activities from abroad. As of October 5, 2021, 86 Telegram channels, 135 chats and 5 bots were recognized as "extremist" (with this list growing almost every day¹⁹). Their administration and the dissemination of information from these channels and chats is threatened with criminal liability.

In the spring and summer of 2021, repressions against non-state media took on an institutional quality. In May, the website of the leading non-state Belarusian media outlet TUT.BY was blocked. (The portal was deprived of its media accreditation in December 2020 but continued to work.) On May 18, a series of searches and arrests of the portal's employees took place, during which 15 people were detained. 11 of them are still in custody. On July 8-9, 2021, a series of searches and arrests of representatives of non-state media throughout the country took place. One of the oldest independent media outlets in Belarus, Nasha Niva, and several regional media resources were included in this wave.

On August 18, searches and arrests of staff took place at the largest non-state news agency, BelaPAN. The editor-in-chief and director of the agency were arrested and on August 23 the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) was liquidated.

Despite the repressions, non-state media, as well as other media channels, continue their activities and their role is in no way diminishing. On the contrary, with the departure of protests "from the streets," the media field has become practically the only area of political confrontation.

The increase in the role of the media is clearly recognized by media representatives themselves, who during this year recognized themselves as significant contributors to social and political processes. Many media outlets were forced to totally overhaul their work, including the agenda, channels for disseminating information, ways of interacting with audiences, locating sources of funding and the physical relocation of editorial offices.

The explosive growth in attention to the public and political agenda in August 2020 meant that most non-state media content was devoted to it. For many media resources,

¹⁷ <https://www.dw.com/ru/беларусь-аннулировала-аккредитацию-журналистов-иностранных-сми/а-55139050>

¹⁸ See, for example: <https://baj.by/ru/content/mid-ne-akkreditoval-ni-odnogo-zhurnalista-evroradio>

¹⁹ An account is maintained on the websites of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Extremist material: <http://mininform.gov.by/documents/respublikanskiy-spisok-ekstremistskikh-materialov/>;

Extremist groups: <https://www.mvd.gov.by/m/ru/news/8642>

especially niche ones, this has become a serious problem, since in the context of mass politicization it was almost impossible to maintain their media agenda. It also quickly became clear that one had to make a choice - to cover political events and retain an audience, or to save one's resources from being blocked and one's team from reprisals.

Interest in political topics continued through the end of 2020. After the political crisis seemed to enter a protracted phase, the media agenda became less homogeneous. Representatives of non-state media explain this as “negativity fatigue” and disappointment since rapid changes did not take place. However, they note that interest in political topics remains and that their audiences remain sensitive to new events (the landing of the plane with Protasevich in Minsk, new sanctions, tougher repressions, etc.).

The current nature of political events and the working conditions of journalists has resulted in having content on the political crisis being largely duplicated by different media. Regional media try to focus more on events that take place in their region, but due to limited resources and access to information this is not always easy. In addition to purely news content, there has been some, although not massive, growth in the demand for analytical and research materials on the interpretation of and reflections on the socio-political situation and prospects for its development. (An indicator of this is the popularity of video blogs of a similar orientation, for example, “Chaly LIVE”, “MINSKI”, and “BalaganOFF”).

It is difficult today to assess audience reach and quantitative characteristics of interest in various topics and problems. This is, first, due to the large number of channels for disseminating information and, second, because of the development of the multiplatform nature of non-state media. Under constant pressure over the past year, content distribution channels have changed significantly.²⁰ The blocking of internet sites and new trends in media consumption have meant that the traditional scheme used by many internet media has essentially been “upended.” If earlier social networks were most often an additional tool for attracting an audience to a website, now social networks (especially Telegram and Instagram) are a separate, practically autonomous direction for many media, which has independent value and its own audience. In addition, during this period, there has been a resurgence of interest in YouTube, which is also actively used by both the media and individual communities (for example, *Kupalavtsy*) and bloggers.

3.2. Cooperation with other actors

Cooperation of non-state media with other actors has changed significantly. Cooperation in any form with government agencies at any level has virtually ceased. Access to high-level events for independent media has always been challenging but it has been completely blocked since August 2020. Under various pretexts, access of non-state media to courts is blocked and accreditation is not issued for coverage of important events, except for special situations

²⁰ Digital Skills Coalition Belarus (2021). Presentation “Media consumption and media literacy in Belarus in August 2021.” <http://digitalskills.by/2021/10/08/prezentatsiya-i-obsuzhdenie-issledovaniya-mediapotrebleniya-i-mediagramotnost-v-belarusi-v-avguste-2021/>

organized for propaganda purposes (such as the press conference with Roman Protasevich on June 14, 2021).

However, the process of “isolation” of non-state media runs much deeper, at all levels. Representatives of regional media report that their journalists are not permitted even at the opening of events in schools or at state cultural institutions’ entertainment events. Officials at all levels have almost completely cut off contact with non-state media and access to government information or receiving comments or responses to inquiries has become impossible. (“They say: no comment, read the newspaper, or look for it in BelTA.”) The ban media applies to all levels. (“At the official level it is forbidden up to the Department of Culture to give any comment to independent portals.”)

Cooperation between the media and business has changed, but here there are different factors. In the commercial dimension the advertising market has been declining since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some businesses have feared advertising in non-state media (and state-owned and partially state-owned businesses and organizations have been prohibited from advertising). However, some individuals in business and campaigns support individual media or media projects through direct grants or sponsorships, but not publicly. In addition, some media outlets note that “more respect and more good will” has emerged in business relations, as political events have seen the role of the media not only as a channel for promoting information and advertising, but also as a public institution.

Changes in cooperation between civil society organizations and initiatives are twofold. On the one hand, the intensity of interaction with traditional CSOs (public organizations, associations, foundations, etc.) has decreased. This was influenced by several factors, including the politicization of the media agenda, displacing other thematic issues; a reduction of activity of CSOs and self-censorship in autumn-winter 2020; repression against CSO and the liquidation of organizations and institutions; and the relocation of many activists abroad and their withdrawal from active work. On the other hand, the interest the media has taken in the information provided by human rights organizations has significantly increased, and information from the human rights center Vesna and other human rights activists occupies a stable place in the agenda of non-state media. To a lesser extent, but also considered a stable source of information and the formation of the news agenda, are civic initiatives that emerged during the political crisis - BY_HELP, BYSOL, “Honest People,” “Voice” (Golos), “White Scrubs,” (Beliye khalaty) and others.

Almost all study respondents noted a change in the relationship between non-state media, newsrooms and journalists. Many describe the situation before 2020 as a situation of competition, but now the issues of competition and being first are secondary, and mutual support and camaraderie have come to the fore. One of the factors in these changes is the destruction of the economic base of the functioning of non-state media. It is now impossible to fight for coverage and the advertising market and the carefully constructed business strategies of yesterday are becoming irrelevant as this dimension of competition is losing significance. However, of course, the main factor is the universality of the situation and solidarity in

opposition to media repression. For mutual support, the Belarusian media not only conduct solidarity campaigns, but also “employ” journalists who are deprived of their status, assist each other with accreditations, exchange materials and information, etc. Of course, from time to time there are conflicts traditional for this environment (primacy in publishing news, national copyright, correct messaging, etc.), but they are almost never trotted out in public.

A significant trend has been the change in the media’s relationship with its audience. The transition to more active use of social networks as an autonomous channel for content delivery has led to the need to organize additional work to communicate with users and create and support communities, which is a completely new direction for many media outlets. In addition, the share of user-generated content has increased significantly, and as journalists’ working conditions become more difficult and editorial teams relocate, it is growing.

3.3. Main challenges and problems non-state media is facing today

The main source of challenges for non-state media today is, of course, the readiness of the Belarusian regime to destroy independent media and channels of influence on public opinion. Given a situation of legal default, any measures may be taken - tightening legislation, harassment of media employees, bloggers and administrators of social media channels, falsified administrative and criminal cases, the blocking of internet media sites, eliminating distribution through subscription and through print media outlets, declaring individual stories or media and channels “extremist,” etc. This sets the stage for the problems facing non-state media today (regardless of the kinds of stories covered).

Changes in funding sources and lack of financial resources. For most non-state media that had established business models in recent years, earning money from advertising, subscriptions, etc., previous sources of funding either sharply narrowed or became unavailable. This puts editorial offices on the brink of survival, preventing them from carrying about their normal work. In addition, political repression has led to the emergence of new “cost items” associated with the payment of fines, the purchase of new equipment to replace that which was seized during searches and arrests and the purchase of software and payment for the work of specialists to ensure digital security and the safety of their activities outside Belarus.

Personnel problems are associated primarily with the political repressions, during which Belarusian journalism has suffered both direct (media employees who are in prison) and indirect personnel losses associated with the forced departure of journalists and editorial offices from Belarus, carrying with them the high risk of working in non-state media inside the country. The second reason is the financial difficulties faced by non-state media today. For employees of independent media, as well as for civic activists, the problem of psychological burnout is also extremely pressing, as people are leaving the profession, unable to cope with working under conditions of constant pressure and stress.

In the last two or three months, this problem has been exacerbated by the relocation of editorial offices and non-state media. The situation is paradoxical as, on the one hand, the

number of specialists remaining in Belarus is decreasing while, on the other hand, they are discriminated against in the labor market. As work in Belarus is associated with high risk, it is more convenient and safer for editorial offices to cooperate with specialists who are outside the country and out of reach of repressive bodies.

Access to information. As we already noted above, non-state media today essentially do not have access to information from state bodies or the opportunity to receive comments or responses to requests from Belarusian officials at any level, as their representatives are not given accreditation to cover events, and under various pretexts are not issued even to those where accreditation is not required. However, this is not the only dimension of restricting access to information. The practice of equating journalists and reporters with participants in current events essentially deprives them of the opportunity to safely cover any events in country. Repressions against those who disagree with the Belarusian regime results in having participants in events, experts, and specialists often refusing to contact the media to provide information, even on condition of anonymity.

Development of competencies and provision of new directions related to the change of channels and sources of information and the means of interacting with audiences. The growing importance of social networks in the work of non-state media and the use of new formats often requires a rapid updating of competencies and new skills related to building communication with audiences and the use of means of production and promotion of content. Increasing the share of user content also requires building additional functionality - moral and psychological encouragement of users who provide information and maintaining channels and communities that stimulate this process while fact-checking and processing information provided by users.

Editorial policy and journalistic standards. The new conditions have compelled many non-state media to reconsider their editorial policies. Increasing the importance of independent media in a protracted political crisis combined with essentially a transition to information warfare requires new approaches and a basis for the media to define the agenda, select priorities, content, speakers and experts, understand which audience to target, choose a proper tone (a tone that the media adheres to in communication with their audience(s)), adapt fact-checking procedures and ensure compliance with journalistic standards.

3.4. Real needs and forms of support

Institutional support. In the situation of survival in which many Belarusian non-state media find themselves today, support is required to cover the institutional costs that ensure normal functioning - rent, cost of hardware and software, employee salaries, etc. It is important for journalists and editorial offices who remain in Belarus to ensure the possibility of replacing equipment seized and to have assistance for repressed media representatives and their families. For editorial offices and representatives of non-state media who were forced to leave the country, help is needed in organization and adaptation.

Legal assistance for those media outlets and journalists who remain in country (payment for the work of lawyers, advice for editorial offices and legal entities that are subject to checks or other forms of pressure), and for those who are forced to relocate (advice on the registration of legal entities, financial mechanisms, specifics of legislation, taxation, etc.).

Psychological assistance in stressful situations, providing opportunities for leisure and restoration of human resources (internships and simply “respite” outside the country for media representatives working in Belarus); psychological adaptation for those who have relocated.

Creation and support of infrastructure for organizing teams scattered across different countries, including temporary “studios,” special coworking spaces and “hubs” for journalists.

Training and new competencies. There is a lack of managerial competencies and, in general, a lack of managers (caused, on the one hand, by the latest wave of repressions directed against the leadership and management of non-state media, and on the other, by constantly changing conditions that require managerial skills of a different level). During interviews with media representatives, the need to develop community management, skills for working with audiences and communities, technical skills related to mastering new formats (for example, increasing the role of video content requiring rapid training in filming and editing), as well as mastering new business models and financial instruments (how to monetize social network content, properly organize a donation system, etc.) were also noted.

Some respondents expressed skepticism about the relevance of traditional educational programs in the field of journalism. (“Many of the educational things that exist - courses, lectures - this is a very good thing in a real journalism situation, not in the context of survival journalism or ‘journalism at gunpoint.’”) Also, according to the respondents, the importance of teaching digital security skills is overestimated. This is, of course, important, however in a situation of complete disregard for legal norms (when “the regime does not break passwords, but fingers,” in the words of one respondent), it should be recognized that no measure can be 100% effective.

CONCLUSIONS

The events of 2020 radically changed the sphere of non-state media in Belarus. Not only their role and agenda changed, but also their relations with other actors, ways of functioning and business models. The media sphere today is one of the most important in the development of political confrontation, and therefore non-state media resources are subjected to harsh repression, ranging from the persecution of individual journalists, bloggers, and administrators of channels and public pages on social networks and instant messengers to institutional repression that threatens the very existence of independent journalism in Belarus.

On the surface, there are resource problems faced by non-state media today. Foremost, this is a lack of financial and human resources, as well as difficulties associated with the forced relocation of journalists and editorial offices. However, no less significant is the problem of

restricting access to information, as well as the need to significantly restructure activities, which requires, among other things, the development of competencies and providing new directions connected to the changing of channels, sources of information and ways of interacting with audiences. A separate challenge for non-state media today is the rethinking of their role in the current socio-political situation and the associated need to adjust editorial policy, devise new approaches and the basis for defining the agenda covered, as well as their relations to other subjects and actors.

The most relevant areas of support for non-state media today are institutional support, legal and psychological assistance, and the development of infrastructure for editorial teams scattered across different countries. In the area of learning and development, traditional journalism education programs are irrelevant, whereas media management training is in demand as are sets of technical skills and competencies, the specific definition of which changes rapidly as the situation changes. This means that educational or training programs in this area today should be configured as flexibly as possible to respond to current challenges and needs of non-state media.

4. ROLE AND PLACE OF BUSINESS IN SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION IN 2020-2021

This section discusses how businesses view the current situation and their own role. Based on the results of the interviews, some conclusions are drawn about the state of business organizations, their reactions to the political crisis and changes in relations with other sectors. It also highlights the problems faced by Belarusian business and its basic needs.

Our small study of the role and place of business in the transformations of 2020-2021 was aimed at clarifying the views of the business community about the current situation, its place in ongoing socio-political transformations and cooperation with other actors. The difficulty of such a study is that business is a large and very diverse group of people, and there are no institutions that can reasonably and representatively speak on behalf of business. Such entities in part include business unions and business associations, but they unite a rather small percentage of business structures. Elucidation of business's view was hampered by both this circumstance and the difficulty of finding respondents who were ready to speak on topics of interest to us.

The empirical basis for the study is 7 interviews conducted in June-July 2021. Respondents were representatives of business unions at the national and regional levels, business associations, a startup hub and a research center.

4.1. General characteristics of the situation

The IPM Research Center, which conducts and publishes monthly monitoring of business sentiment (IPM-index), notes in its latest report²¹ for June 2021 that the current value is in a recession zone (business is expecting a worsening of the situation). Among the top 5 obstacles to business expansion are the following:

- high uncertainty of the economic environment
- distrust of the legal system
- macroeconomic instability
- low demand
- lack of qualified personnel and management

Respondents to the Center's surveys assess as high the existing risks for doing business, which is at the maximum level since beginning observations in October 2020. Now it is 4.53 according to a five-point system (for comparison, in October 2020 this indicator was 4.4 points, and in December 4.36).

According to a study²² by SATIO (November-December 2020), the political crisis in the country, according to respondents, has brought and is bringing business more problems than

²¹ <http://www.research.by/analytics/index/2106/>

²² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LEO-dnzie7lalnuqHy_rUy0w_AlwRK8u/view

the pandemic. According to a BelBiz study (Imaguru)²³, as of spring 2021, 58% of Belarusian startups left the country. A quarter of the Belarusian founders of startups who have left do not plan to return to Belarus. For the rest, the main condition for returning to Belarus is democratic change. According to a survey²⁴ of owners and directors of Belarusian IT companies conducted in October 2021 by Belarus IT Companies Club, 51% of respondents have increased the number of employees abroad compared to 2020, companies have experienced a serious outflow of personnel and many companies are engaged in partial relocation (30% of companies have already relocated part of their team or in the process of relocation and 22% are planning this). The level of pessimism in assessing the business climate in Belarus continues to increase, with 80% of respondents believing that the conditions for IT business will worsen.

According to respondents from business organizations, business approached the series of crises of 2020-2021 as a fully established social institution. It stood as a phenomenon and became more mature. The pre-crisis situation (until 2020) is, of course, assessed as more favorable for doing business, although people in business still had to survive in a not very favorable environment. Business has always been in a state of both conflict and cooperation with the state.

The state of the maturity of business is also expressed in the fact that it has a humanitarian and social impact, through charity and cooperation with civil society and the state on socially meaningful projects. At the same time, it is an indicator of the state of society. If business and society can understand the importance of, for example, cultural projects or accommodation of people with disabilities and allocate time and resources for this, this is an indicator of business's understanding of its role in society apart from receiving profit and paying taxes.

The events of 2020 and especially 2021 have made the business versus politics dilemma more relevant than ever. Business has no single answer to this challenge. Many believe that for the most part businesses have been and remain (or at least they are trying to be) neutral and invisible, to survive and make money in the system and in the conditions that exist. But there are people and organizations that have offered a different response to this question; that is, those who took part in one form or another in the election campaign or in subsequent protests. Thanks to such examples, it is believed that business has become more vital, more visible and more active. That it has voiced its position and has become an actor in the political process. The business community participated in processes related to the pandemic and in helping doctors (in the form of financial assistance and with various volunteer initiatives, even with the state's initial denial of the fact of the pandemic), as well as in organizing remote work and, to some degree, participated in the political processes of 2021. This participation, as a rule, was not coordinated, but simply an expression of the position of individuals - managers, business owners, or company employees. Often this participation was carried out of the public eye in

²³ <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2021/09/29/imaguru-startapy-belarusi-za-god-okazalis-v-novoy-realnosti.html>

²⁴ <https://www.bicc.co/news/kak-idut-dela-u-it-kompanij-v-2021-godu-opros-belarus-it-companies-club-v-oktjabre>

different forms (e.g., tolerance towards “wrong” employees and even attempts to strike, help with various initiatives or with political actors, etc.). For this political and civic-minded business “paid” with inspections and closings. However, many companies that fell under repression were able to recover by opening another legal entity or changing the name, the owners, etc.

Big business, according to some respondents, is more “silent,” as it is more in the public eye. Small businesses are easier to close with a wide range of tools available from various government institutions, including inspections and heavy fines.

The crisis has undoubtedly impacted business, as the conditions for doing business have seriously deteriorated compared to 2019. However, business has the advantage of flexibility and “survivability” (“this is its nature”), owing to which it continues to function.

4.2. Changes in the relationships with various stakeholders

Business associations

Associations bring together a small (up to 10%) number of businesses. Now their advocacy work is essentially frozen (what little remains is at the local level) and the cooperation between associations and the state is limited and formal. There are practically no contacts with senior officials, but some contacts at the middle and grassroots levels have remained. According to one respondent, sometimes these officials, in private conversations, express their support for businesses affected by repression. It is believed that business associations have become more professional. At the same time, the “politically neutral” position of some business associations is perceived as pro-government.

The issue of businesses trusting one another has become more serious. As one respondent put it, “we have become more respectful of each other, although we are closely monitoring financial discipline.” A lot of communication has gone private.

Relationship with the government

Repression of companies and business representatives who supported the protest is observed on the part of the state. Previous working forms of cooperation have become less effective, for example the composition of advisory councils has been changed (there are more officials and fewer business representatives), government agencies still send some documents to business associations and council members but with significant delay, etc. Cooperation is characterized as formal or conducted as if in opposition to one another (“as if waiting for a catch”). Representatives of the business community believe that the attitude of the state towards them can best be expressed by the phrase “sooner or later they will come for money” - regardless of whether this business or its key personnel have demonstrated their political convictions or not. Often there is no contact with government officials for moral and ethical reasons. However, at the same time, many believe that it is still necessary to connect with

them or that this is inevitable - at least at the level of the tax inspector. In general, business considers the state to be toxic (and this applies to all government agencies, not just law enforcement agencies). As one respondent noted, “If someone has taken some action that can be at least remotely interpreted as pro-government, then they will look for opportunities to clarify their position, like ‘this is how you read it, but it’s not like that’ to his colleagues and partners, those whose opinion matters to him.”

Relationship with the media

Even before the crisis, businesses were not very interested in publicity (which sharply distinguishes Belarusian businesses from their counterparts in neighboring countries) since attracting too much attention was fraught not only in this year and a half of crisis, but also earlier. Now businesses are obviously less interested in having their social activities covered in the media (“business is afraid to open its mouth”). However, business representatives are grateful to the media for covering repressions, the closing down of companies for political reasons, etc. Businesses were punished not only for supporting political actors or CSOs, but also for trying to directly support disgraced media, such as through advertising. To some extent, this support has been preserved, but through “back channels.” In addition, as with business, media was dealt a serious blow.

Relationship of business to society

Respondents believe that the attitude of Belarusian society to business until 2020 was generally quite positive (apart from pseudo-businesses) and has remained so. Society showed solidarity with the businesses affected and customers were patient with those experiencing problems for political reasons. However, at the same time there is the attitude of “why get involved in politics?” when citizens see it as inevitable that the authorities punish businesses for their active position.

Cooperation with CSOs, initiatives and activists

The rise of this kind of cooperation and corporate social responsibility (CSR) has taken place over the last decade. According to one respondent, this was an asymmetrical and surprising response to the quashed protest of 2010 - the rise of culture, charity and social initiatives. Throughout this process, businesses (at least some part of them) have begun to understand why civil society is needed. Many joint projects have been implemented in virtually all areas - education, culture, ecology, charity, health, urban planning, sports, etc. This trend has been growing, although often this cooperation was non-public or not advertised. The crisis of 2021 has sharply cut off a wave of such projects, and now, according to respondents, there are very few left. The remainder of support is not public.

Ideally, business and civil society have great potential for cooperation. They have gotten to know each other better, although there is still a lot of work to be done. NGO activists are still sometimes perceived as “freak enthusiasts” and business activists are seen as “bags of

money.” Business believes that CSOs can be experts in their fields, share experiences in CSR and work with the media. In turn, businesses can not only provide financial support, but also train CSOs in management and business processes.

Cooperation with political actors

The lack of a single answer to the question about the relationship between business and politics is demonstrated by business and in theoretical discussions on this topic. Opinions differ. Some believe that it is okay, for example, to support a party that defends the interests of business. Others are against direct support, both because it is questionable from an audit point of view, and because the confusion of business and politics is, in their opinion, something that should not exist.

4.3. Main challenges and required support

The most important challenge for business is the situation of legal default in the country. Many people use the term “return to the legal position,” although at the same time they admit that before 2020 there were numerous problems with it. Whether it is about “returning” or “forming,” the absence of a legal environment is cited as the number one problem and challenge. In trying to defend against reprisals, there is often a moral choice offered about which bargains you are willing to make against your conscience. An example is the Tempo pizzeria, which in June 2021 removed a pizza called “tut.by”²⁵ from its menu, arguing that otherwise they would be closed.

Closely related to the problem of legal default is the problem of general working conditions (business climate). This is a whole set of factors, among which inequality with the government sector and numerous state interventions in the activities of the private sector are highlighted.

Among other problems, business representatives named the following:

- a rise in prices for materials and components and a decrease in choice
- access to funding
- “shrinking” domestic demand
- secondary impact of sanctions (“and if the sanctioned business is an important client, then where do we go?”)
- on-payment, especially from the public sector
- qualified personnel
- closed borders, inability to travel to exhibitions and to communicate with partners
- the departure of some businesses from the country

²⁵ <https://marketing.by/novosti-rynka/set-tempo-pereimenovala-pitstsu-tut-by-i-slovila-negativ-v-sotssetyakh/>

Overall, some respondents fear that the continuation of repressions and the deepening of these problems will cause a rollback to many years ago - a simplification of the entire system of relations between business and society. That is, instead of complex processes of coordination and building dialogue, having only direct instructions “from top to bottom” that do not consider the interests of business and possible problems or costs.

As for support, business representatives expect from the state, as already mentioned, the ensuring of a functioning legal environment, a functioning institution of private property, decriminalization of economic offenses, macroeconomic stability, and most importantly that the state should not “interfere” with their activities. Small businesses also need financial support from the state.

Possible options for supporting business from other actors could involve the following:

- internships and professional exchanges (for example, Yuri Zisser said that tut.by would not have come into being without the Community Connections program)
- assistance with reprisals against business
- public coverage of stories of reprisals against businesses
- legal assistance

4.4. Potential role in future transformations

Respondents agree that in the current environment, business is simply engaged in survival. There is no talk of any new investments, expansion or new directions. Business is just waiting it out, as if it has fallen into hibernation, especially small and regional businesses. Opinions differ regarding the role of business in socio-political transformations in the future, with some believing that the situation will remain the same (that is, not business, but someone else will be the driver of potential changes), however others believe that business should and will speak out, since it is business that demands reforms, and it is business that is ready to actively participate in reform process and transformations. However, it seems that business is ready to become a driver of reforms only after some change in the situation and will not be an initiator or active participant in the process of political change itself. In the event of positive changes, there is the potential for a “passionate explosion” (not only in the business environment, but also in businesses themselves), sharp growth, a boom in external and internal investment, and rapid and modern digital transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

In the current situation, business lives and works in a “frozen expectant” mode with negative prospects for the future. New investments are not being undertaken (or “old” projects ready to go are ending).

The business community considers legal default to be a serious problem and would like to restore (or even establish a new) working legal environment as soon as possible. General working conditions (business climate) are also a serious problem, with essential inequality between state and private property, a lack of state support, non-payments, sanctions, high risks, etc.

Business considers interaction with the state toxic, but out of necessity it maintains a minimum level of communication. As for the relationship with the media, Belarusian business was largely reserved even before the political crisis and given the current situation it is trying to avoid public attention even more, expecting more problems than benefits from this. The upsurge in relations with CSOs and various initiatives is now over, both because there are very few such organizations left and because such support is perceived as potentially carrying risks of persecution.

Businesses are ready to take part in building a new economy (and a new society to the best of its ability, with individual businessmen ready to participate in political life as well), but they are not ready to be a driving force that changes the socio-political structure in the country.

5. BELARUSIAN DIASPORA: ITS ROLE AND NEEDS IN SUPPORT FOR BELARUS

This section examines the situation that arose in the Belarusian diaspora following the 2020 elections, where, just like inside Belarus, a politicization of Belarusians took place and new initiatives appeared. Based on the results of the interviews and on the authors' observations, conclusions can be drawn regarding the main areas of activity of diaspora organizations, the attitude of Belarusians abroad to the situation inside the country, and their activities aimed at helping compatriots in Belarus and those who were forced to leave for political reasons. Cooperation of diaspora groups with the authorities, businesses and the third sector of the countries where they are located is taken separately and the problems that Belarusians abroad face in their work are highlighted.

Within the framework of this study, the task of quantitatively assessing the size of the diaspora was not set, rather the authors attempted to assess its qualitative development, areas of work in connection with the political crisis in Belarus, as well as the urgent needs of organizations operating abroad aimed at helping Belarusians. From the beginning of June to the end of July 2021, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of Belarusian organizations located in three countries - Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine - since these countries became the main direction of forced migration of Belarusians in connection with the events of 2020 and the ensuing political crisis. At the same time, as of the beginning of autumn 2021, Georgia can be added to these countries, as it has become a kind of “hub,” or place where many activists of organized Belarusian civil society went and began the process of official registration of their organizations.

5.1. Belarusian diaspora and its activation after 2020

The number of Belarusians living abroad is estimated differently in different sources. If Belstat gives a figure of 177,000 Belarusians²⁶ who left the country between 1995 and 2019, the average estimates of statistical agencies of other countries and international organizations (such as the World Bank and the UN Department of Socio-Economic Development) have set the number of people who have left and were living abroad at about 1.5 million²⁷. At the same time, one of the largest Belarusian diaspora associations, the Association of Belarusians “Fatherland,” gives on its website a figure of 3.5 million Belarusians abroad²⁸. Qualitatively, until 2020 diaspora organizations of various orientations existed and operated in different countries around the world, in some cases promoting a democratic agenda, and in some, on the contrary, cooperating with the Belarusian embassies and receiving their support.

²⁶ Belstat official website, migration data. Available here: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/naselenie-i-migratsiya/migratsiya/> (viewed 18.10.2021).

²⁷ World Bank migration data. Available here: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM?locations=BY> (viewed 18.10.2021).

²⁸ Official site of the Association of Belarusians “Fatherland.” Available here: <https://zbsb.org/news/abroad/226/> (viewed 18.10.2021).

Like the processes of politicization of the Belarusian society inside the country since the spring of 2020, in many foreign countries the intensification of Belarusians living there has commenced. Solidarity in the form of transfers of funds for specific requests and campaigns probably began with the period of the spread of COVID-19 and the lack of sufficient policies regarding the epidemic within Belarus. Belarusians abroad then joined fundraising campaigns to help their compatriots. However, the main impulse for mobilization was the 2020 election campaign itself, when Belarusians living abroad who were not previously involved in political topics, began to become actively involved in political processes. Movements among election commission members and observers abroad who conducted exit polls at foreign polling stations in 23 countries and the subsequent protests against the Belarusian authorities' use of violence towards peaceful post-election protesters were among the factors that contributed to the unification and mobilization of Belarusians living abroad. In the period immediately after the election, meetings at Belarusian became a form of association of Belarusians abroad, which later led to new organizations and initiatives to help those Belarusians who for various reasons were forced or due to personal circumstances decided to leave Belarus. Over time, the wave of mass mobilization of Belarusians living abroad until 2020 was dormant and took on organized forms. However, in parallel with the movement of large numbers of Belarusians abroad, they have been mobilized, and those who came to Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine have often taken part in actions in support of Belarus since the beginning of the political crisis, though as members of the diaspora they do not always participate.

In addition, Belarusian organizations and initiatives that were forced to leave the country began to operate and continue their activities from abroad. One of the first and most obvious examples of such organizations is the BySol Foundation and other emerging professional solidarity foundations (for example, cultural, sports, medical, etc.).

We can say that the political events of 2020 in Belarus significantly mobilized the Belarusian diaspora, where a wave of mass mobilization took place and new organizations arose aimed at helping the Belarusians. The work of some Belarusian organizations that existed previously and which operated abroad (mainly those that had human rights and other civil-political issues on their agenda) intensified. In addition, there also was a migration of some organizations that began work in Belarus. Regarding the areas of work, diaspora organizations are engaged in humanitarian aid, including resolving issues of physical residence; legal and integration support for arriving Belarusians; assistance to Belarusian political prisoners and their families; organizing and conducting specialized programs for certain target groups (for example, journalists); advocacy to promote a Belarusian agenda; organizing and conducting both politically and culturally oriented events, etc. That is, these organizations work with different agendas and in different directions related to Belarus.

5.2. Work with Belarusian refugees and their needs

As in the case of the Belarusian diaspora, estimates of the number of those who left Belarus due to the political crisis differ significantly. Some experts talk about tens, some of hundreds of thousands who left. The reasons for departure also differ, with some leaving

because of economic migration while others were forced to depart because of persecution by the security forces in Belarus. Moreover, it is often difficult to separate the reasons for leaving, both due to the objective complexity of the situation of leaving the country itself, and due to the abuse of assistance by some of the newcomers.

Representatives of organizations working with people who have left Belarus note two peak periods of arrival. The first is the period from mid-August to the end of December (immediately after the elections and the ensuing violent actions and before the introduction of restrictions on ground travel by the Belarusian authorities). The second is the period that began in the spring of 2021 and continues at the time of writing, which is associated with targeted repressions against civil society, civic activists, journalists, etc. According to the respondents, in both periods we can speak of qualitatively different socio-economic factors and motivation for leaving Belarus in groups. In the first case, the reason for leaving was psychological factors - trauma after encountering violence, fear of persecution, etc. - whereas in the second, we can talk about targeted prosecutions, criminal cases brought, etc.

The situation with those who fled from Belarus is complicated by the fact that often people left with their families, without a means of making a living and with a minimum of personal belongings. In the period after the elections, public initiatives abroad had to quickly build logistics schemes to support those who arrived (assistance in finding places to live, financial support, collection of clothes, etc.) and to master the skills of supportive and integrative work to minimize the impact of Belarusians on host communities (preparation of the necessary documents, clarification of legislation, placement of children in educational institutions, etc.). It should be noted that all this happened at a time when restrictions related to COVID were in force in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, which further complicated and continues to complicate the work of aiding refugees.

Working with those who left Belarus has become one of the main areas of activity for Belarusian organizations that already existed abroad and Belarusian organizations that emerged during and after 2020. At the same time, in each of the countries under consideration, there are specific issues associated with working with people who came from Belarus:

- A specific feature of Ukraine is legislation that is not favorable for migration, and which also applies to Belarusians who have arrived in country. Restrictions on the length of stay, difficulties with paperwork and, generally, the legalization process, as well as the presence of a politically ambivalent attitude towards Belarusians (perceived by some politicians as potential “agents of influence of the Russian world”) were noted by respondents.
- The Lithuanian government helps with the issuance of humanitarian visas, which facilitates the legalization process, however, there are practically no integration programs for foreigners in country (specifically, language learning), and there are also serious restrictions on hiring citizens from third countries for qualified work (i.e., the hiring process can be comparatively easy either in the case of manual labor positions or for highly skilled positions).

- In the case of Poland, humanitarian visas and legalization processes are probably the most favorable, but there are also issues surrounding immediate assistance, including finding housing, getting a job, and initial integration and socialization.

In summary, we can say that for those who came to Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, in the opinion of organizations working with this target group, relevant requests for assistance include 1) material and financial support and assistance with housing (payment of and search for); 2) legal assistance (especially, the issuance of visa and residence permits) on the legalization and employment of those who came to the country; 3) integration into the host community (assistance in finding a job or educational institutions); 4) psychological support and assistance; and 5) leisure and social issues (requests for organizing events for arriving Belarusians).

5.3. Those who left and their relationship to the situation in Belarus

According to respondents, leaving the country, does not necessarily mean for Belarusians taking leave of the current political agenda. Belarusians who left the country after the summer of 2020 continue to follow events in their homeland, actively participate and, in some cases, organize support actions. In addition, they often become part of organizations and initiatives that help those coming from Belarus by sharing their experiences and practices (a kind of “peer counseling”).

At the same time, there is a group of people who left (this is especially true for people who left immediately after August 2020) who, either because of internal burnout and psychological trauma or because they are busy taking care of everyday issues, stop following the events taking place in Belarus and do not participate in any Belarusian initiatives in their host country.

5.4. Cooperation between the diaspora and the authorities, business and civil society in country

Various practices can be mentioned of cooperation between diaspora organizations and representatives of government, business and civil society. It can be assumed that the degree of this cooperation depends on how well the representatives of such organizations are integrated with the community of their host country. In the case of diaspora organizations that existed before 2020 and which include Belarusians who have worked professionally in the third sector up until then, active interaction with local authorities, receiving assistance from businesses and business professionals of the country where the organization is located and working with civil society organizations (especially those dealing with refugee issues) should be noted. These organizations can conduct advocacy campaigns to promote Belarusian issues at a higher political level. Organizations created after the events of 2020, but whose representatives are well integrated into society in their host country, similarly described their ties with the authorities, business and CSOs. As for new initiatives whose representatives themselves recently arrived in Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, their interaction with all the above entities is somewhat unsystematic and aimed at solving some narrow issues and problems

(for example, issuing visas), however these are organizations that said they receive support from Belarusian business.

However, although all organizations said that they cooperate, and in some cases receive support from business (host country or Belarusian), still the volume of such assistance is said to be small.

If discussing the political plane of the diaspora's activities, then in the countries under consideration the level of political interest in Belarus is high. In addition, there are institutionalized structures of the Belarusian opposition in Lithuania and Poland, ensuring that the promotion of the Belarusian political agenda at the national level takes place without the active participation of Belarusian diaspora organizations. At the same time, the respondents themselves said that Belarusian organizations in Ukraine need to be more actively involved in promoting the Belarusian democratic political agenda.

5.5. Cooperation among Belarusian diaspora communities

After the activation during the 2020 election campaign, newly emerged and those Belarusian organizations that were already established, according to respondents, strengthened their cooperation. It is difficult to judge whether there is any organized coordination center or leading organization, but during the interviews all respondents noted that they cooperate in one way or another with Belarusian diasporas in other countries. For example, cases of humanitarian aid from Belarusians in Germany for organizations working with Belarusian refugees in Lithuania and Ukraine were mentioned. They also discussed joint solidarity actions and cultural projects.

If talking about cooperation among diaspora organizations located in one country then, as a rule, it is also present here. There were no significant differences in activity and the degree of cooperation depending on when the organization was created. At the same time, conflicts and disagreements occur between organizations, the basis for which can be both subjective factors (personal conflicts, misunderstandings, etc.), and, likely, the work of special services aimed at creating a split in Belarusian organizations abroad.

5.6. Problems and needs of diaspora organizations

Representatives of Belarusian diaspora organizations spoke about the various issues they face and about what they urgently need to meet these issues. Among those most frequently mentioned are the following:

1. Lack of financial resources to organize and provide assistance and support to arriving Belarusians
2. Burnout and leaving of organization staff. Need for psychological assistance and support for employees and volunteers

3. Need for personnel training, organizing advanced training programs, etc. to ensure activity sustainability
4. Assistance and additional support for the implementation of new programs (for example, training) for both Belarusians who came to the country and for Belarusians inside Belarus (for example, assistance to families of political prisoners)

5.7. Role of the diaspora in the resolution of the political crisis in Belarus

Regarding what the diaspora can and should do to resolve the political crisis in Belarus, respondents almost unanimously named several important areas. First, diaspora organizations should be engaged in promoting the Belarusian political agenda at the level of the governments of their host countries and advocating the Belarusian agenda in principle, including working with local media. Second, as practice has shown, the diaspora has been and remains an active agent of various fundraising campaigns for Belarus and Belarusians, collecting significant financial resources for goals and campaigns of various kinds, both inside and outside the country (support for actions and initiatives of the BySol campaign and others). And third, work with local businesses in host countries should be conducted to clarify the situation in Belarus relative to doing business given human rights violations (for example, refusing to conclude business contracts with Belarusian companies where workers' rights are violated). In a broader sense, the diaspora should be promoting the economic agenda of democratic forces, working with international business campaigns and financial institutions on the implementation of projects with Belarusian companies related to the state, allocation of funds, loans, investments, etc. The diaspora could also become a human resource for Belarus when democratic changes occur.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Belarusian diaspora during the period under study, processes took place that largely mirrored those that took place in society within the country. Specifically, at the initial stages of the political crisis the politicization of the diasporas intensified and their involvement in social and political activities related to the situation in Belarus increased. Organizations that existed before 2020 continued their activities and new initiatives emerged.

At the same time, as the political crisis worsened, the involvement of Belarusians abroad changed. Some of the initiatives that newly emerged continued their activities, whereas some people mobilized for the elections and then during the period of active protest returned to their ordinary life outside of activism.

One of the main areas of activity of Belarusian organizations abroad has become assistance to those who were forced to leave the country. Diaspora activists are also actively involved in advocating for a Belarusian agenda at the level of national and local authorities, promoting and supporting campaigns and other activities related to Belarus.

At the same time, Belarusian diasporas and activists face the same problems in their work as people/organizations within Belarus (including psychological burnout, the need to improve digital security skills, etc.). On the other hand, however, they are also forced to solve problems specific to the country where they are located (for example, with migration legislation in Ukraine).

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The events of 2020 radically restructured relations in Belarusian society, affecting almost all social groups, sectors and institutions. During this period, civil society in Belarus acquired a new quality, where the potential for solidarity, civic responsibility and self-organization gathered over previous years was actualized in the wake of the reaction to the coronavirus crisis and political mobilization. The surge of not only political, but also social and cultural activity both in the country and abroad has greatly changed the image of the Belarusian nation, foremost among Belarusians themselves.

However, the unfolding process of the “awakening” of civil society in a much broader framework than it had existed previously immediately ran up against massive repressions by the Belarusian regime. The nature of these repressions is changing. If in the summer and autumn of 2020 active participants in political processes and actions fell under pressure and persecution, then in 2021 the regime switched to institutional repression and suppression of any activity independent of it or not completely under its control. Using this logic, vastly different groups and sectors are subject to restrictions and persecution: activists of the “new wave,” traditional and established CSOs, independent media and business as a space for free economic activity.

The conditions for civil society activities are steadily deteriorating in almost all areas, the most important of which is basically legal default in the country. The deterioration of economic conditions, however, as well as changes in the media environment are also important. The Belarusian regime is methodically destroying the institutional foundations of cooperation between different sectors and the infrastructure for the manifestation of any free activity, regardless of losses to the economy or international image, and without considering the social and humanitarian consequences for the country. Under these conditions, cooperation schemes among organized civil society actors are changing significantly along with state and other social actors. Cooperation with state structures at any level in many cases is reduced to the bare minimum²⁹. This is a reciprocal process, as state structures and institutions are increasingly fenced off from society and public structures and business are looking to work together with them less and less. At the same time, in the field of independent activity there have been significant shifts in the forming of symbolic unity. However, real interaction (for example, CSOs with media, business and “new communities”) is today greatly hampered by both external factors (political repression) and the weakening of these actors themselves, as they have been forced to expend much effort on survival and adapting to continually worsening conditions.

²⁹ Some public organizations, however, continue their cooperation. In exceptional cases, such cooperation may even take place with the participation or support of Western governments. For example, even though the Goethe Institute and the German Academic Exchange Program (DAAD) were closed, the J. Rau Minsk International Center will administer the next stage (2019 - 2022) of a program on behalf of the Federal Government of Germany, which provides for “**promoting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Belarus** by strengthening the capacity and competencies of civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as through strengthening cooperation between government bodies , business and civil society.” (For more details, see <http://ibb-d.by/programma-podderzhki-belarusi/>.)

An additional new circumstance is the forced departure of both people and entire structures (CSOs, media outlets and companies) from the country, which, on the one hand, expands diaspora activity and, on the other hand, requires the co-organizing activities within the country and abroad. Specifically, organized civil society is faced now with the question of both self-preservation and building its activities under fundamentally new conditions (often from abroad).

Today, the development of Belarusian civil society is determined by its ability to respond to three recognized challenges to varying degrees.

First, it is the preservation and replication of existing resources, including human resources, competencies and organizational resources. Solving this problem requires both actions and activities related to ensuring security, mutual assistance, leisure and psychological support to maintain human resources and capabilities, as well as institutional support and the development of new, more flexible and adaptive forms of coordinating activities, planning, technical and financial support of organizations and civil society initiatives.

Second, is the need to build sustainable relationships among CSOs, “new communities” and civic initiatives that appeared in 2020-2021 and that now perform significant organizational and infrastructural functions and run independent media. These are all actors who today are agents of political and social transformations in Belarus. The transition from symbolic unity to building a range of network interactions will not only ensure the preservation and replication of existing resources, but also position them to be better prepared for new challenges and emerging opportunities.

Third, is the activation of civil society, self-awareness as actors in a socio-political context, harmonization of ideas around the current situation and directions of transformation and recognizing one’s role in effecting positive change.