

Policy Brief

BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY TODAY: HOW DOES IT FUNCTION AND WHAT CHALLENGES DOES IT FACE?

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Belarusian civil society today: How does it function and what challenges does it face?

Contributors:

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- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

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Belarusian civil society:

How does it function and what challenges does it face?

Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 2 June 2022, at the webinar conjointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and GLOBSEC. The discussion focused on the continued political crisis and the repression of civil society in Belarus. There are nearly 2000 recognised political prisoners in Belarus today (although in reality their number might be much higher). Also, tens of thousands activists have been incarcerated, expelled from the country, fired, and persecuted.

This policy brief looks at the state of civil society in Belarus today to understand the challenges within and beyond the country, when many civil society activists are dispersed around the world and continue their activities from abroad. The policy brief also discusses how the international community could help them survive and pursue their agenda. Three sets of needs are specified in the policy brief to support civil society in Belarus: emergency needs, stabilisation needs, and development needs.

Background

Due to the political crisis and repression hastened by the authorities, civil society in Belarus is facing existential challenges to survival in an exceptionally complex environment. Understanding and evaluating the needs of civil society and identifying the most appropriate tools with which to support it are crucial for its survival in Belarus.

The Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and Belarusian democratic forces aspire to achieve a situation in which all those who need support inside Belarus - as well as for the Belarusians abroad fighting for democratic change in their homeland - can receive the necessary assistance for their activities. However, such support requires both the political will of the governments of other countries and international organisations, as well as the resolution of many technical issues regarding the transfer of aid to Belarus in the context of the continued political repression pursued by Lukashenka's regime. Against this background, we ask: What is the current situation within Belarusian civil society? What initiatives exist and function there and how? What needs do different organisations and initiatives have? What has already been done and what else can the international community do in order to provide better support for civic initiatives?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office](#) (OST Research Centre), the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO) and [GLOBSEC think tank](#). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by **Elena Korosteleva**, Professor of Politics and Global

Sustainable Development, and Jean Monnet Chair of European Politics, University of Warwick, and the speakers of the event included **Alexandra Logvinova**, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Head of Outreach Department; **Andrei Yahorau**, Analyst of the Centre for European Transformation, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's adviser on development aid; **Berend de Groot**, Formerly the Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the EU to Belarus; **Pavol Demeš**, Visiting Distinguished Fellow, the German Marshall Fund (GMF).

Civil society initiatives created in Belarus after 2020

Civil society takes many different forms in Belarus. In addition to conventional formal civil society organisations (CSOs), since 2020, there are also newly established professional and other communities and initiatives. People started coming together on the basis of their professional affiliations (such as medical workers, students or sportsmen) and residential locations to form communities. Among the latter are the well-known *dvory* activists or neighbourhood communities. They do not have proper registration or formal membership systems, yet they are part of the civil society in Belarus. Even though they do not rest on organisational structures and models in the classical sense, they manage to operate. They are quite active organising activities and projects with local infrastructure. They try to develop local infrastructure such as transportation or other small things that go in line with local government. They support each other at the community level, cooperate, and provide psychological support. They also run projects supporting Ukrainians. They do, however, face certain challenges which will be analysed in further detail below.

Civil society in Belarus: An analysis of challenges and positive developments

With growing repression by the Lukashenka regime, civil society is facing additional political and legal challenges. Political conditions under the authoritarian regime have deteriorated and the state repressive machine continues to suppress independent civic activities including criminal prosecutions of civil society activists, along with the liquidation of organisations and their activities. Cooperation with the state in almost all sectors of civil society in Belarus has ceased or been reduced to a minimum level even for those types of civil society organisations that traditionally had a good level of interaction with the state and stayed far from political issues. The legal environment has also become more restrictive. It's almost impossible for civil society organisations to develop the usual connections and cooperation with state institutions, for different reasons. For instance, civil servants are afraid of any connections with civil society, they fear repressions and potential criminal charges against them. Sometimes civil society organisations stop cooperation with state agencies by themselves due to a more restrictive legal framework. For example, foreign aid legislation for CSOs has become even more restrictive than before.

In addition, the financial conditions have worsened for the civil society initiatives, which divert their attention and focus. The funding problems have taken two specific forms. First, the communities who are in need of funds are requested to do something that is not necessarily seen by them as the activities they should pursue, but in order to survive, they accept earmarked funds. In a lot of instances they adjust their priorities just to be able to receive funding. Second, there is a significant number of people who are just unaware of existing funding opportunities. They lack information on how they can get external financial

support to fund their activities. Moreover, they need further training in how to fundraise more generally in terms of developing sustainable business models to effectively run their activities. With growing authoritarian pressure, the physiological factors also weigh in, as stress, fear and burnout are pressing issues that civil society in Belarus faces nowadays, whether they are formal organisations or informal neighbourhood communities.

Civil Society alive and active despite the challenges

There are three major crises that civil society in Belarus has been going through since 2020. First, the Covid-19 pandemic; second, political turmoil and the revolution of 2020 —unfinished democratic transformation in Belarus; and third, repressions against civil society organisations, especially, the liquidations of CSOs in the middle of 2021. There are more than 500 CSOs that have lost their official registration since then.¹

Although political conditions have worsened over recent years, civil society in Belarus is alive and active inside the country. There are certain positive factors that should be highlighted as encouraging developments. First, the general level of knowledge of the Belarusian population about civil society organisations and civic activities has grown. As one of the speakers mentioned, for instance, before events in 2020, both connected to the Covid-19 pandemic and political crisis in Belarus, only three percent of the Belarusian population could name any civil society organisations in Belarus. This has changed significantly recently, as a lot of people know different kinds of initiatives like voluntary organisations helping people on different issues ranging from Covid-19 pandemic to political repression. Second, the level of public trust in civil society organisations, human rights associations, and independent media has grown to a large extent. Today around 40 percent of the Belarusian population trusts human rights organisations. Before 2020, one could hardly imagine that people were interested in human rights organisations and usually people could not distinguish between law enforcement agencies and human rights organisations because of a linguistic trick that makes the two phrases difficult to tell apart in Russian: “Pravozaschitnye organizacyi I pravoochranitelnye organizacii” (Human rights organisations and law enforcement organisations. It is now obvious ‘who is who’ because law enforcement agencies are those who repress and violate human rights. People are also aware that human rights organisations are those who try to protect people from those oppressions.

Third, the wave of social and political mobilisation in 2020 brought many new activists to the civil society sector. A growing number of various civic initiatives including local communities, professionals, students, workers groups etc. are active in Belarus. It is true that there has been a substantial drop in the scope of civil society activities of these informal initiatives, but still these new initiatives have been appearing in several cities, big and small. One final positive development is the mobilisation of the Belarusian diaspora which actively joined various pro-democratic activities or supported civil society inside Belarus and elsewhere. This is a new dynamic that brings a new momentum to civil activism in Belarus, which is qualitatively different from that in previous years.

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https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/situatsiya-so-svobodoj-assotsiatsij-i-organizatsiyami-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-respubliki-belarus-obzor-za-iyun-2022-g?fbclid=IwAR1P6B93Q0bi6mw_69_o5NoWo7UW5VVQiHyQiE-xWknE7iYKbKKGK4CxSfws

The current needs of the Belarusian civil society

Civil society in Belarus has three types of needs where the international community could be of assistance. The **first** one is short-term emergency needs, such as supporting victims of ongoing political repression. People need individual support for rehabilitation and adaptation as well as for their family members. This also covers psychological help, assistance in finding a job and support in relocation. This includes the provision of services for Belarusian citizens affected by repression and also those in exile. On a related note, the visa issue is still burning because people need visas not only when they face repression, but sometimes for civil society activities too.

Second, civil society has certain stabilisation needs, which means the restoration of normal activities once the current crisis mode is overcome. Some of the civil society organisations in Belarus have been operating in different environments —inside and outside the country— at the same time, which creates certain organisational challenges. This requires certain adjustments to cope with complex situations and to stabilise their activities. Also, establishing bigger Belarussian civil society organisations would be important to more effectively support democratic transition.

Third, there are development needs, which refer to the medium and long-term needs covering institutional development in certain spheres of the civil society environment. This includes supporting ecosystems for civil society activity, building model institutions in different sectors (such as higher education) to serve as examples for other civil society actors, and the creation of basic infrastructure to support coalition building and capacity building in the civil society sector. In this sense, the development of organisational institutional ownership proves critical for the future of civil society in Belarus.

Conclusions

This policy brief discussed the main issues associated with civil society in Belarus. The policy brief started with the challenges faced by pro-democratic and independent Belarussian civil society organisations. Among such factors — the growing authoritarian repression, financial and organisational problems, and the Covid-19 pandemic — were highlighted as major challenges that civil society organisations in Belarus, whether formal ones like CSOs or informal ones such as neighbourhood initiatives, encounter. However, this policy brief also strongly underlined the fact that civil society in Belarus is alive and active operating on several different platforms. There are certain positive developments that will help raise their resilience and capabilities to cope with the authoritarian regime in Belarus. For this to happen, however, there are several requirements, with which the international community can

prove instrumental in providing support. In this regard, three policy recommendations are developed in the following section.

Policy recommendations

1. Belarusian civil society needs to move from a needs-based assessment to a more programmatic approach, as the political, economic and social landscape in which they are operating is quite diverse and different than the past. In this context, solidarity and unity among civil society actors in Belarus prove critical to coordinate their activities and to keep in contact with local communities.
 2. It is important to provide fundraising support to the civil society organisations in Belarus. This support should also include elements of training civil society professionals on fundraising, organisational management, developing viable business models etc.
 3. The material support should be complemented with psychological support in different ways. Civil society in Belarus has experienced high stress and burnout over the last few years due to the challenges mentioned above — especially due to the brutal crackdown of the regime.
 4. It is critical to address the emergency needs of civil society in Belarus given the circumstances, yet this should be done with a long-term perspective that also considers society's stabilisation and development needs as discussed in this brief.
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