



Policy Brief

How resilient is Belarusian civil society? A comparative perspective

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Contributors:

Oxford Belarus Observatory: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- 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.

OST Research Centre: OST Research Centre is a department of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST). The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

IGSD, University of Warwick: Institute of Global Sustainable Development (IGSD) is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience and sustainable governance. IGSD supports the work of OBO by providing expertise, networks and advocacy for this initiative. It also complements the OBO expertise through its own projects which focus on Resilience in Ukraine from a comparative perspective (2022-23); the GCRF COMPASS+ project on Central Eurasia (2022-23), and the EU Horizon project SHAPEDEM-EU focusing on the eastern & southern neighbourhoods (2022-25). IGSD has expertise from life sciences, humanities and social sciences, and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

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How resilient is Belarusian civil society? A comparative perspective

Executive Summary

This policy brief focuses on the issues related to the resilience of civil society in Belarus. In 2020, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians peacefully united to protest against fraudulent presidential elections and political repression unleashed by the Lukashenka regime. Since then, repression against civil society has intensified, which has also led to a significant exodus of people seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. This has been further exacerbated by the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in which Lukashenka has become an accomplice. At the same time, Belarusians remain resilient in their fight for democracy. New underground forms of resistance have emerged in the country. Civic action has continued, which, despite all adverse conditions, remains one of the strengths of Belarusian civil society. There are, however, significant challenges facing civil society in Belarus. What keeps civically active people determined and resilient? What forms does resilience take? What support to Belarusian civil society has already been provided and what else is needed to prevent resilience from wearing off? This policy brief addresses these and other relevant questions and offers a set of policy recommendations.

Background

Over the past two years Belarusian society has demonstrated unprecedented levels of resilience.¹ Firstly, it survived and reorganised itself to respond to the brutality and unprecedented violence unleashed by the Lukashenka regime on the peaceful protests following the 2020 elections. Secondly, it has also evolved to explore various partisan and underground modes of resistance but also while acting from abroad. Some would argue that while on the surface, the regime may seem to have succeeded in thwarting the unrest, in reality, behavioural change is afoot. As a consequence, more pressure is being applied by the authorities to keep order whilst, on the other hand, civil society seeks to reshape itself in response to the existing and evolving challenges.

What keeps civically active people determined and resilient? What forms does resilience take? What support to Belarusian civil society has already been provided and what else is needed to prevent resilience from wearing off? How do Belarusian Democratic forces and civil society participate in needs' assessment and programs of support?

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](#) and [IGSD University of Warwick](#) (Institute for Global Sustainable Development). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by **Katsiaryna Lozka**, PhD Fellow at Ghent University, and the speakers of the event included **Andrei Yahorau**, Analyst of the Centre for European Transformation, and Sviatlana

¹ For more information see Korosteleva, E. and Petrova, I. (Eds. 2023) [Resilient Communities of Central Eurasia](#); Korosteleva, E. and Petrova, I. (2022) [Power, People and the Political: understanding the many crises in Belarus](#), 'Community Resilience in Belarus and the EU response', (Oct. 2021), *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review*

Tsikhanouskaya's adviser on development aid; **Alesia Rudnik**, PhD candidate in political science (Karlstad university, Sweden), Research Fellow at Centre for New Ideas; **Natallia Riabava**, Expert, Director of SYMPA/BIPART; **Jeroen Willems**, Deputy Head of Unit, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Eastern Partnership, European Commission; and **Susan Jay**, Project Director, FHI 360.²

Analysis of the issue

Resilience is a complex concept that comes in different forms. This is also the case when it comes to assessing the resilience of civil society in Belarus. This policy briefing starts with a recent resilience index developed to provide a general picture of the current situation in Belarus; then it continues with an in-depth assessment of civil society activism in the country. Based on an analysis of the role of domestic and international actors, the final part offers policy recommendations to improve the resilience of civil society in Belarus.

Belarus resilience index

There are different quantitative methods that measure the resilience of a country. As “resilience” is a complex term that can be conceptualised at the local, sectoral or national levels, different approaches focus on the concept in different ways. One approach to measuring resilience quantitatively was recently developed by the Centre for New Ideas (CNI), a Belarusian think tank now based abroad.³ The main objective of the index was to determine the areas of public life in which Belarus is most vulnerable or most resilient, building on a scale from –5 to +5, where –5 corresponds to factors that undermine resilience, +5 as factors contributing to resilience, and 0 indicating stagnation. The scale was applied to the analysis of four spheres —namely political, social, economic, and informational—divided into 18 areas and 77 indicators.⁴ The findings of the CNI Index suggest that the political sphere in Belarus is the most vulnerable. The massive repressions against citizens under the Lukashenka regime, the migration crisis in the summer of 2021 which continues to date, albeit at a lower rate, and rapidly deteriorating relations with the outside world (including a declaration by Belarusian authorities concerning withdrawal from the Eastern Partnership) have all contributed to the vulnerability of the political sphere. The social sphere, on the other hand, receives a better rating. The only area with a positive rating in this sphere was the diaspora, which does not directly depend on the state.⁵

² We would like to extend our thanks to Berend de Groot for his contribution to this policy brief and the webinar discussion by providing his comprehensive feedback.

³ “Belarus Resilience Index 2021,” Centre for New Ideas, <https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/themes/newbelarus/assets/v6/DSI21-ENG.pdf>

⁴ All the indicators were applied for the analysis according to the suggested scale by 39 experts analysing Belarus as a system according to their expertise. For more on the methodology and details of the index, see the link in footnote 3.

⁵ Areas such as the relationship between society and the state and public organisations receive very negative scores. A detailed analysis of sub-indicators suggests the assessment given to the social sphere would have been far less promising if it were not for the diaspora. It is important to note that all non-governmental organisations that have fled the country are in the same position as the diaspora in this index, so they are included as the parts

Like other spheres the economic sphere is in a state of crisis, assessed as -1.44 on the scale. Although foreign investment never exceeded 3% of GDP over the last 10 years, the current political crisis has even further discouraged both foreign but also domestic investments. The earlier emphasis on high tech and innovations was disrupted by the political crisis, relocation of IT specialists, and pressure on private companies. Moreover, the government does not provide any effective mechanisms for managing unemployment while the political crisis only worsens brain drain. Sanctions undermine the prospects of the country to properly integrate with the global economy. Also, the lack of economic diversification leaves Russia as the dominant actor in Belarus' exports and imports.⁶

When it comes to the fourth aspect, the informational sphere is also assessed as being in crisis. Here, the division between state and non-state actors was revealed to be crucial. The blocking of websites and censorship of traditional media and cyberspace are issues commonly faced by independent journalists.

In summary, the index suggests that the Belarusian public sphere, as a multifaceted system, cannot be deemed resilient. The results of the resilience index show that in all spheres, the system is either in a negative state or stagnating. The most important factor influencing this result has been the political crisis. The Belarusian political system has been unable to overcome the stress test in the political sphere, and this has had an impact on all spheres of public life. This illustrates how the effect of a crisis in one sphere is felt in other spheres, weakening and reducing the system's ability to develop and improve. In this sense, Lukashenka's repressive regime in Belarus undermines the capacity of the nation in terms of political, economic, and social development.

Civil Society in Belarus

Unlike the crisis of the Belarusian political system, civil society appears to be one of the most resilient and adaptable spheres. Therefore, a closer analysis of Belarusian civil society requires a more in-depth approach.

Before 2020, when mass protests took place, there were about three to four thousand civil society organisations (CSOs) in Belarus. In 2020, Belarusian civil society became more active —especially informal initiatives that were represented by local communities, professional communities such as doctors, researchers, sportspersons etc. and independent trade unions (which were also on the rise at the time). Although some of these communities have disappeared due to repression, some of them continue to exist and function. Their main activities are focused on helping the repressed, spreading information, community building with neighbours, and dealing with local, domestic problems. The main challenge they face is the difficulty of acting legally in a highly repressive environment. After the repressions that

of the civil society and social sphere. Given the extreme political climate, dozens of these organisations have been forced to close their offices in the country but continue to engage in activities from abroad.

⁶ For details, see the website of the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/en/>

followed the August 2020 election and especially in 2021, many Belarusian CSOs were liquidated. Although it is difficult to provide accurate statistics, most Belarusian CSOs inside the country have frozen their activities or keep a low profile. Others have left the country but kept ties with Belarus. It is estimated that around one thousand CSOs have been closed since 2020.⁷

The political and legal environment in Belarus is highly repressive and hostile to civil activism. Detentions and purges are happening on a daily basis. For example, people get fired for having participated in protests; the authorities also instituted a series of systematic purges against tens of thousands of political opponents. Irrespective of whether people are employed by the public or private sector, nobody is immune from purges.

Although the conditions are not suitable for civil activism in Belarus, people are still willing to continue their activities. For understandable reasons, however, they prefer non-political activities, such as social, health, culture, environment, recycling and volunteering work. Some organisations, when they are permitted to act, are fully controlled by authorities. The Lukashenka regime also replaces CSOs with governmental structures or GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations).

However, in spite of the hostile environment, many people are ready to continue civic activities. For example, 37% of those who were engaged in protest activities keep contact with like-minded people. According to a recent survey conducted by SYMPA/BIPART in September 2022, more than 60% of respondents remain part of different grassroot initiatives.⁸ The same applies to those who have moved out of Belarus. They have not lost contact with Belarus. Around 85% of respondents continue to be involved in different activities in support of Belarus. For instance, Belarusians abroad remain active in social media, send money to people in Belarus, and provide different sorts of assistance to them.

International support to civil society in Belarus

The EU used to provide yearly packages of support, which was called “Support to the Republic of Belarus.” In 2021, the title changed from “Support to the Republic of Belarus” to “Support to the People of Belarus” following the rigged elections. The EU’s policy towards Belarus—and civil society for that matter—is described with three S-es. The first S is for the regime; it is linked to *Sanctions*. The EU has imposed certain sanctions against Belarus and made a broader effort to condemn and internationally isolate the regime that is not only repressing its own people, but also supporting Russia’s war in Ukraine.

⁷ Law Trend, “Analysis of the draft law “On the essentials of civil society,” December 2022, <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/pravovoe-regulirovanie-nko/analysis-of-the-draft-law-on-the-essentials-of-civil-society>

⁸ SYMPA, “State and current needs of Belarusian civil society organisations (CSOs) in a situation of political crisis. Monitoring: January - July 2022”, https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/csos_needs_2022-12-02_final-ed-for_print.pdf

The two other S-es focus on the people of Belarus —*Support* and *Solidarity* with the Belarusian people. In terms of solidarity, the EU unveiled last year its commitment to support free and democratic Belarus. The EU unveiled a three billion € economic package “to support Belarus when it turns democratic.”⁹ As this package is currently on hold, in the interim period, the EU developed alternative policies to support Belarusian civil society and help increase the resilience of the people of Belarus. In the early days after the rigged election in August 2020, like all other donors trying to find a way to help out in the aftermath of this crisis, the EU provided emergency assistance —for instance, legal support, medical assistance, but also support for relocation of many people whose lives were very much endangered. The EU support helped independent journalists and media actors continue to reach their audiences in Belarus, breaking through the Russian and Belarusian propaganda. As it turned into a protracted situation in Belarus, the EU moved from providing only short-term support to a more sustained support to enhance capacities of civil society in Belarus. However, as the context has drastically changed, the EU moved away from providing essentially what it used to do in the past —direct and financial support to organisations that were on the ground in Belarus. As many of those organisations may no longer exist, the EU policy makers started to think the EU has to work through intermediaries, EU-based civil society organisations that can provide some ground for support and reach out to the people in need, inside the country. The EU has brought over €100 million to support civil society and the youth of Belarus since August 2020.

Conclusions

The emergence of grass root community action groups in Belarus was a promising development during the last months of 2020. Belarusian civil society organisations, relying on either local sources or co-operating with international donors, organised many successful activities to reach a wide range of audiences at home and abroad. On the other hand, the growing repression has curtailed much of the civil activity in Belarus. Although the political and institutional environment is not conducive for independent civil society organisations to operate freely, civil society proved to be resilient in Belarus. It will remain critical to pursue Belarusian ownership of civil society activities in the country.

The Belarusian diaspora also contributed to the resilience of society in different ways. However, Belarusian diaspora face certain challenges related to legalisation issues when it comes to visas and changing rules for students. Also, significant issues persist for those who have been residing in the EU for a long time as well as for those who have migrated twice — specifically the Belarusians fleeing the war in Ukraine. While some countries, Poland, for example, have come up with creative decisions, introducing the specific type of humanitarian residency permit, other countries have not included Belarusians into this eligibility list when it comes to the directive on protection of those fleeing the war. In conclusion, both domestic

⁹ For the speech of European Commission president Ursula von Leyen on this package, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pulQg_b1cI8

and international actors have important roles to play to improve the resilience of Belarusian civil society and facilitate the democratic transition of the country.

Based on the ideas in this policy briefing, three policy recommendations come to the forefront.

Policy recommendations

1. The flexibility of donors is critical for Belarusian civil society organisations. Local action in Belarus should be supported morally, technically, and financially by international donors. This also requires flexibility, especially when it comes to reporting and accounting requirements.
2. Many people working for civil society organisations need psychological support, which becomes a growing problem both in Belarus and abroad. This could be addressed more effectively by countries and non-state institutions who support civil society and the democratisation process in Belarus.
3. Operational support on an individual level is vital —different cases show that when individuals are relocated to other countries, their salaries in CSOs are not enough to live there or they have to pay taxes which are higher than in Belarus. There are significant problems with visas for CSOs people, activists, but also their relatives. It is important for international actors to focus on actionable change concerning these specific concerns of civil society in Belarus.

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