



CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS

RESEARCH REPORT

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN BELARUS AT THE BEGINNING OF 2023: *THEIR CONDITION, RELATIONSHIPS, AND NEEDS*

Prepared by the Center for New Ideas (CNI) together with the Centre for European Transformation (CET) within the framework of the project “Emergency assistance and rehabilitation of the civil society in Belarus 2022-23”

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Since 2020, civil society in Belarus has been undergoing a significant transformation — a process that deserves studying in itself.¹ However, in addition to purely academic interest, the ongoing transformation gives rise to practical questions from those international organizations and institutions that have traditionally taken a great interest in, and have influence on, the development of civil society in Belarus. One of the goals of this study is to contribute to the description of the current state of civil society in Belarus, as well as to collect information for decisionmakers about the kinds of support that are most needed and effective in the current conditions.

The **key objectives** of the study were as follows:

1. To offer a description of the structure of Belarusian civil society in its current state;
2. To determine the prevailing types of relationships between representatives of various clusters of civil society;
3. To identify the main systemic challenges and strategic needs of organizations and initiatives representing various civil society clusters.

The **object** of the study was the civil society organizations (CSOs) of Belarus, understood as broadly as possible, without restrictions as to either the form of citizens' associations or the goal of their joint activities. Namely, at the stage of collecting information (i.e. when prospective participants were invited for an interview, focus group, or to complete a questionnaire), the following were included within our definition:

- *All [non-governmental] non-profit organizations of any type (including institutions) that have ever been registered in Belarus (past or present);*
- *Non-profit organizations acting in the interests of Belarusians, registered outside of Belarus;*
- *Initiatives that bring together at least three citizens of Belarus (key participants), have existed for at least six months, have an identity (name) shared by all participants, and the activities of which are of a repeatable nature (i.e. they have gathered for more than one activity).*

The delineation of the boundaries of civil society in Belarus in its current state has become a separate subject of discussion among experts and representatives from CSOs themselves, as well be discussed in the “Tension Points” section of this report (see Section I.4).

The empirical base of the study comprises findings from the following **methods**:

1. Ten interviews with experts: representatives of research organizations, CSO associations, CSO resource centers, and international grant-giving organizations. The results of interviews with experts are presented in the first part of the report (“The current state of civil society in Belarus”).
2. Three focus groups with representatives of CSOs from various areas of activity. These were held in Warsaw, Vilnius, and Tbilisi. The total number of participants was 27 people, 12 (44%) of whom represented CSOs that started operations in 2020 or later, and 8 (30%) represented CSOs that had never been registered as a legal entity. Each focus group achieved a diverse range of participants in terms of

¹ Such monitoring is indeed being conducted, most sustainably by the following research centers and projects: SYMPA/BIPART (sympa-by.eu), Lawtrend (www.lawtrend.org), and People's Poll (t.me/narodny_opros). One-off studies are also being undertaken (see, for example, the overview of research during the years 2021-2022: https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/cso_needs_2022-12-02_final-ed-for_print.pdf, pp.4-12).

their CSO activities. The results of the focus group discussions are presented mainly in the second part of the report (see Section II.1, “Priority Needs”).

3. Five focused interviews with representatives of CSOs located and operating inside Belarus. The results of these interviews can be found throughout the report.
4. An online survey of CSO representatives through multiple recruitment channels (using the contact networks of CNI, CET, BHRH and the study’s experts): we received 82 completed questionnaires², including: 36 (44%) from representatives of CSOs, a significant part of the participants of which continue to live and work in Belarus; 34 (41 %) from representatives of CSOs that started their activities in 2020 or later; 21 (26%) from representatives of CSOs that have never been registered as a legal entity; and a further 10 (12%) from those that are not currently registered anywhere, but used to be (in Belarus) and/or are today in the process of registration outside Belarus (i.e. a total of 38% were not registered at the time of the survey). The average time taken to complete the online survey was 16 minutes. The results of the survey are presented in the section “Priority needs”. The profile of the respondents is given in the Annex.

Data collection period: March - April 2023.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

There is an inherent limitation to conclusions that are based on summarizing the opinions of experts, the results of focus group discussions and focused interviews. However, we sought to offset this limitation by inviting people with opposing experiences and opinions to participate in the study, and identifying common ground between them.

We also cannot claim that the results of the survey are representative of the totality of Belarusian CSOs, and we cannot extrapolate from figures obtained to the entire population. Despite this, we managed to achieve representation in the sample of a wide variety of CSOs, so it is correct to treat the results obtained as an illustration of existing trends. In addition, taking into account the recruitment channels used, the sample can be considered as a potential target audience of assistance programs from resource centers and donor organizations located outside of Belarus, and in this regard, information about the needs of this audience is of independent value.

We thank all the participants in the study.

² While the survey invitation asked the organization/initiative/community to fill out the questionnaire once, we cannot rule out the possibility of multiple representatives from the same CSO participating. We expect that if such “duplication” does occur, however, it is only in isolated cases. For this reason, when presenting the results of the survey, we operate on the assumption that CSOs are the unit of account.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implementing unprecedented repressions, in 2021 and later, the current Belarus authorities equated Belarusian CSOs of various areas of activity and levels of organizational development in recognizing their influence on the political development of the state.
2. The CSOs that continued to work in the new conditions inevitably found themselves in a situation of resistance toward the repressive regime and working for the democratization of Belarus. At the same time, not all of them perceive their activities in terms of the ongoing political confrontation.
3. The new conditions made CSOs reassess both their methods and the expected results of their work. In the past, CSOs focused on the organization of public collective action (group participation in CSO projects), whereas today most of their activities have shifted towards building interpersonal trusting relationships between their representatives and target groups. Advocacy for the interests of target groups by the CSOs has been replaced with counseling on independent defense of civil rights.
4. More than a third of surveyed Belarusian CSOs presently operate in a hybrid format, with management located outside the country. This creates a number of difficulties for interpersonal interaction, but also opens up new opportunities for strengthening CSOs. CSO leaders continue to raise funds, build strategies, and come up with new ways of working.
5. A still greater number of the surveyed organizations operate completely from outside the country and have built a whole ecosystem of interaction, performing important functions for the development of the entire civil society in Belarus: building links between different CSOs within Belarus, attracting resources, and advocating for the interests of Belarusians at the international level.
6. There are already a number of sources of tension within Belarusian civil society, which may intensify as time passes. The key causes of disagreement are: divergent understanding about the main goals (the democratization of the country vs. the promotion of a thematic agenda); the distinction between political and civil initiatives; suspicion of any contacts between CSOs and state institutions in Belarus; and the admissibility of the use of force to achieve goals.

Given the current context, and based on a study of the needs of CSOs, the following **measures to strengthen the civil society in Belarus** appear the most relevant:

- Support the team. People comprise the basis of civil society and, under immense political pressure, no measures are redundant: it is important to provide psychological support, develop emergency evacuation routes out of the country, and also cover the increased costs of living abroad.
- Ensure safety of interpersonal relationships, and develop umbrella structures. This provides an opportunity not only to maintain, but also to expand the scope of activities. It is important for activists to understand what their colleagues from other communities are doing, share experiences, and know where they can apply for various resources.
- Provide financial support. It is important to develop new sources of funding other than support from institutional donors, while donors need to be flexible with regard to procedural requirements, as well as to the criteria for selecting CSOs for support, since most of the work is still done by unregistered (grassroots) initiatives.
- Promote the agenda and interests of the Belarusian civil society outside of Belarus in conditions when the complicity of the country's current regime in the Russian war entails a restrictive policy of other countries towards Belarusians.
- Offer new safe ways and platforms for communication with target audiences. It is important to look for opportunities to talk about the activities of CSOs, share their best practices, which can then be used by the citizens of Belarus in their daily lives and for independent defense of their rights. Stories about the civil society's achievements (not losses) are also in great demand.
- Support the synchronization of CSOs activities: holding conferences, discussions, workshops and other events that contribute to the consolidation of thematic areas and the entire sector in general.
- Offer new approaches to strategic planning in rapidly changing circumstances.

I. THE CURRENT STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN BELARUS

1. THE CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND TO THEIR CURRENT CONDITION

No description of civil society in Belarus would be complete without an outline of the external context in which it exists and develops. The events of 2020-22 determined the current state of civil society, and this chapter reproduces the opinion of experts and direct participants on those events.

Two specific factors affected Belarus in 2020. First, the state's response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and, secondly, the explosion of state violence after the rigged presidential election. Social researchers describe the societal response to this in terms of an increase in solidarity among Belarusians and an increase in the intensity of horizontal ties. This is, essentially, the basis for the formation of civil society: 2020 proved to be a time of rapid growth for informal (unregistered) civil participation initiatives.

"A huge number of [initiatives] have emerged. Not to mention that many sectors have appeared and developed. I don't know many as such. Now [the sector] is large, simply enormous. Territorially, numerically, and so on." (Expert 1).

A significant part of the initiatives that appeared in 2020 related to "local communities", which were formed from people living in some limited area (e.g. the apartment blocks round a shared courtyard or a given district of a city) to resolve issues somehow tied to the territory. For example, providing mutual assistance during the pandemic or planning localized protest activities. An equally characteristic feature of this stage in the development of civil society in Belarus was the emergence of associations of people by profession (the so-called "solidarity funds": medical, sports, cultural) and the use of crowdfunding platforms (such as BySol and ByHelp).

One further consequence of the socio-political events of the summer of 2020 is the inclusion of Belarusians living in other countries into the common agenda of Belarusian civil society.

"Before that, diaspora structures were very often even pro-Lukashist. And now, in the same Lithuania, a whole diaspora has arisen, and until the year 2020 we knew nothing about it." (Expert 1).

"A diaspora is a community of people with different skills who unite, not even for some specific activity, but in order to be a community for support and development, including self-development. I mean the old diaspora in the first place, not the new one. Those people who have been living abroad for a long time and moved before 2020. I think there is a certain number of countries where these efforts bring fruit, turning these communities into rather sustainable organizations today." (Expert 7).

July 2021 marked the next important point in the development of civil society in Belarus in the period under review. Dozens of non-profit organizations were liquidated in the space of a few days, and from that moment the systematic persecution of their employees began. As of April 30, 2023, according to Lawtrend, at least 1,283 non-profit organizations had been forcibly liquidated or decided to self-liquidate, and at least 60 representatives from CSOs had been imprisoned.³ The consequence of these repressive measures was the mass exodus of CSO activists and leaders from the country. They continued their activities, however, and so the emigration of Belarusian civil society had begun.

³ <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/situatsiya-so-svobodoj-assotsiatsij-i-organizatsiyami-grazhdanskogo-obshhestva-respubliki-belarus-obzor-za-aprel-2023-g>

“The decision-making center has been moved abroad, not the function, but the decision-making center. This was due to the longing for security, the desire to avoid the risks of possible repressive influence from the authorities. And for Belarus it has become a qualitatively new phenomenon.” (Expert 5).

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed the context yet again. Within the civil society of Belarus, new areas of activity appeared: not only humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees and people in Ukraine, but also, for example, the initiative to collect information on the movement of Russian troops (“Belarusian Hayun”), as well as various forms of assistance to the military forces of Ukraine. In response to the aggravation of relations between the current authorities of Belarus with Ukraine and other countries, the working conditions of the exiled Belarusian CSOs became more difficult. And most importantly, the war severely compromised the possibility of long-term planning for many.

“Another challenge is the changing political and regional situation. We are influenced not only by Lukashenka, we are also influenced by others: the European Union, Ukraine, [and] Russia, in a sense, too. The situation is changing. The war has been going on for a year, and we still have not fully adapted to this situation. Meanwhile, the war can change course, and quite rapidly. It comes to the point that we are preparing for all scenarios of war at once. That means, the challenge is strategizing under conditions of uncertainty. Both for the organization and for the entire civil society system, and in general the entire nation of Belarusians.” (Expert 3).

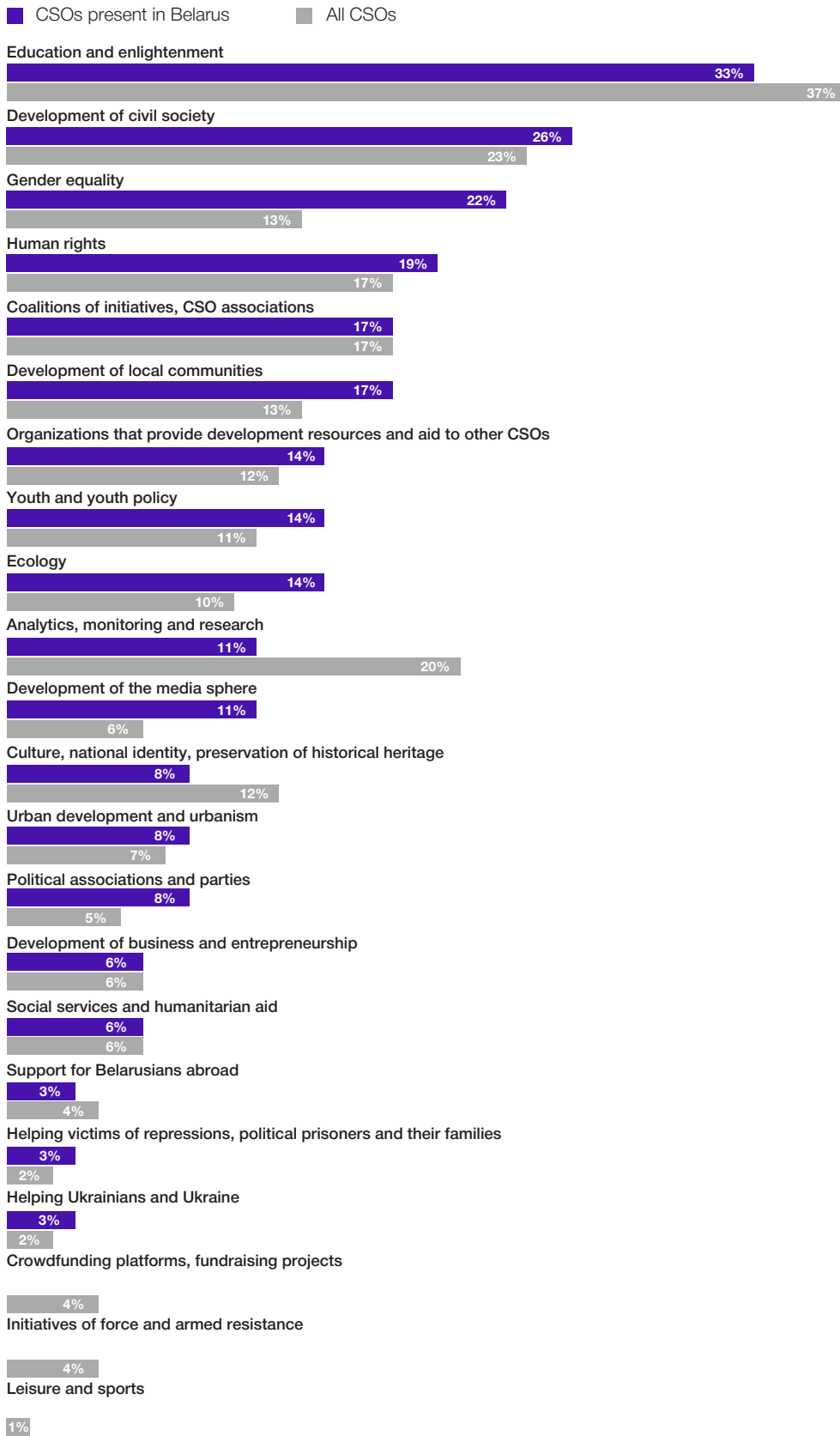
2. THE ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED TODAY

By 2023, the main thing that can be said about the CSOs that continue to work inside Belarus is that their activities are covert. Civil society has become “latent”, as one of the experts put it.

“Most often, if something is done, it is not publicized on behalf of an organization, but somehow covered up, so it is very difficult to assess what is happening or not happening at all.” (Expert 8).

Graph 1. Directions of activity of CSOs

(multiple answers possible)



The total number of CSOs that completed questionnaires is 82, including 36 still present in Belarus

Judging by the range of areas of activity that those who took part in the survey were involved in (see *Graph 1*), it is apparent that civil society in Belarus remains diverse. We cannot give an exhaustive description for each of the areas (that is outside the scope of this study), but we note the characteristic features of some of them:

1. Despite the unprecedented scale of repression, CSOs have been able to retain a significant proportion of their staff and redefine the goals of their activities; however, to what extent current goals meet the definition of civil society is a debatable question (for more details, see Section I.4 “Tension points”).
2. The major part of the activity is now interpersonal interaction between the representatives of CSOs and representatives of their target group, built on personal acquaintance and trust (rather than trust in the organization). *“Collective action is almost impossible, not even discussed in most cases. The maximum is some friends, neighbors who are still disgruntled, and are trying to change something.”* (Comment from a participant at the Vilnius focus group).
3. Organizations are actively engaged in education, training and consultation on topics in which they specialize (mostly online).
4. The imperialist discourse of Russian propaganda, which intensified with the start of Russia’s full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, led to a change in the activities of Belarusian CSOs. The importance of *“Culture, national identity, preservation of historical heritage”*, as a focus of civil society activity, increased *“in order to save the nation in general in this wholly new situation”* (Expert 4). Despite all the repressive measures on the part of the current authorities of Belarus, *“cultural initiatives again and again try to produce some kind of action, both online and offline, like holding some kind of semi-closed events, exhibitions, cultural events, excursions.”* (Expert 8)
5. Human rights activities inside Belarus have been reduced to collecting information about the countless violations of such rights and charitable assistance to political prisoners and their families. However, defense of human rights remains one of the most active segments in terms of volunteer engagement.
6. Community members come up with activities that are as non-politicized as possible to maintain horizontal connections: *“To meet and play some Belarusian-language board games, talk about environmental issues, something else.”* (Expert 10)
7. Support for political prisoners and their families not only unites already existing communities (where a member of the community is imprisoned), but also steadily creates new ties between people: *“This is a type of the complicity relationship that remains one of the most stable today.”* (Expert 8)

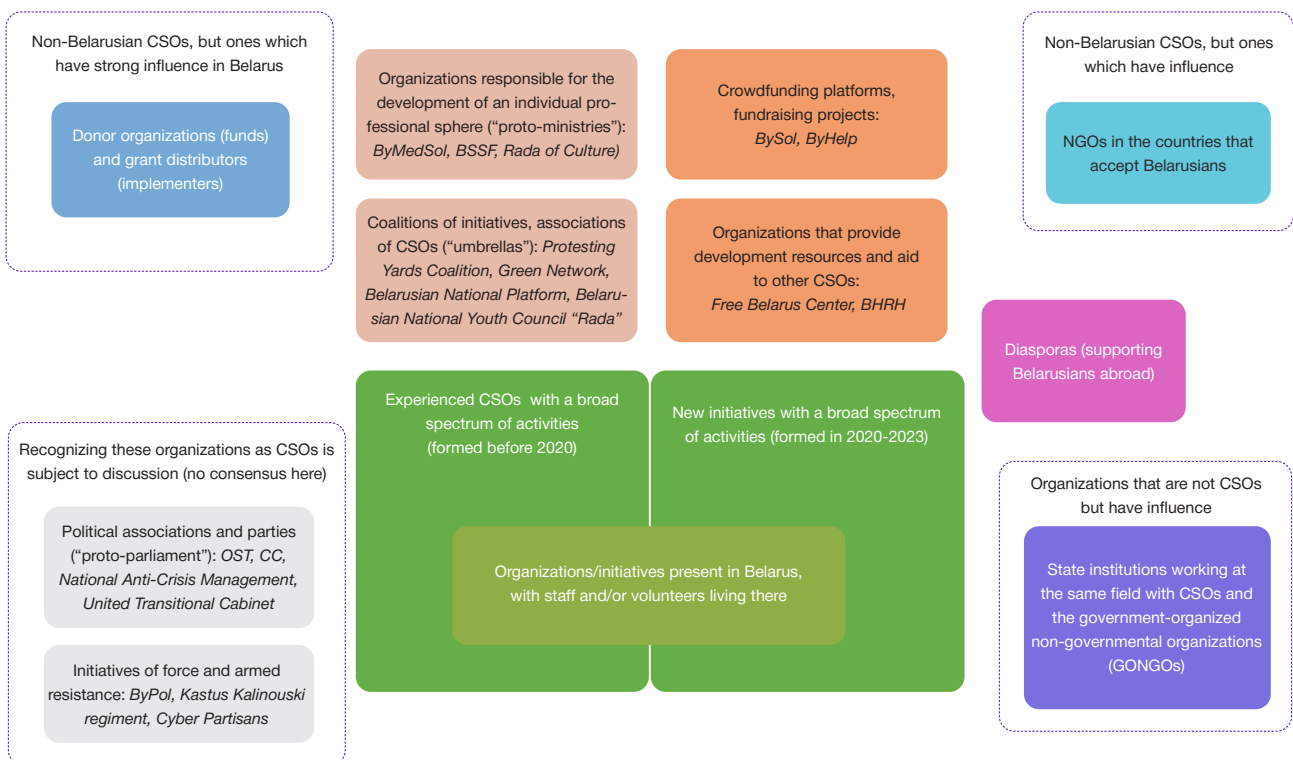
There is one more noticeable trend — the rapid organizational development of new initiatives and communities (from among those that appeared in 2020 and later), which continued to operate after the start of mass repressions, leaving Belarus in whole or in part. Of course, this did not happen to everyone: not everyone survived the repressions, the difficulties of emigration and other challenges of time. Nevertheless, by 2023, the solidarity funds have turned, in the capacious definition of one of the experts, into “proto-ministries”: they have been engaged in advocating for the interests of their professional communities at the international level, writing reform concepts and large-scale project activities. (This trend is best illustrated by the fact that the Foundation for Cultural Solidarity was renamed the Rada of Culture). A significant number of initiatives have held strategic sessions, registered outside of Belarus (others are exploring this possibility), and have begun to apply for funding from international donor organizations.

“They are getting institutionalized, creating visible structures, councils. Over the past six months, a lot of organizations have registered — there are more than a hundred, in fact. And they begin to enter this world of the “grant industry”, losing a lot of volunteer contributions along the way, but this is probably a natural process.” (Expert 6)

3. SUBJECTS AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THEM

In the course of the study, we considered several ways of categorizing and conceptualizing the members of civil society in Belarus. We ultimately settled on the variant presented on *Figure 1*. In addition to a wide range of CSOs working directly with the citizens of Belarus (these can be called “service CSOs”), the former foundations of professional solidarity — and now “proto-ministries”, crowdfunding platforms and diasporas,⁴ - there are other important elements of civil society in Belarus: organizations that provide resources and services for the development of Belarusian CSOs (for example: Free Belarus Center, BHRH); and various associations of CSOs (for example: Coalition of Protest Yards, Green Network, Belarusian National Platform, Belarusian National Youth Council “Rada”, NGO Assembly). In addition, there are ongoing discussions about whether to classify political associations and initiatives of force and armed resistance as civil society (for more on this and other disagreements within the sector, see the section titled “Tension points”). Finally, in light of the current state of civil society, one must also mention several organizations that are external to it but with whom the CSOs interact in the course of implementing their core activities. These non-CSOs are, therefore, nonetheless interested in the results of ongoing CSO interaction and they include: grant-giving organizations, non-governmental organizations in countries hosting Belarusian CSOs, as well as state institutions of Belarus and state-established non-governmental organizations (GONGOs).

Figure 1. Subjects of civil society of Belarus and other stakeholders



⁴ Here and below, “diasporas” in relation to CSOs means those organizations whose main activity is the support of migrants from Belarus.

CSOs present inside and/or outside the country

The largest, and most basic, cluster in the overall structure encompasses organizations, initiatives, and communities that work with specific issues and target audiences. One cannot ignore the fact that some of these “service CSOs” have completely relocated to other countries, while others work mainly from Belarus, and others still have employees both inside Belarus and abroad. The survey participants comprised 55% working mainly or completely from abroad, 10% working mainly or completely in Belarus, and 35% with a “hybrid” model of work, respectively. At the same time, both experts and our survey of CSO representatives indicate that this situation has not caused problems so far: only 7% of respondents said that their CSO over the past year has faced the problem of increasing misunderstanding between team members inside Belarus and those outside. Even if resentment arises at the interpersonal level, it has not interfered with working practices. On the contrary, CSOs try to use the situation to their advantage as far as is possible:

“The people outside the country are tasked with activities which cannot be implemented in Belarus. First of all, this is public work, working with media, working with various social media, and the organization of some kind of aid programs for the people inside Belarus. Meanwhile, those who remain in Belarus are responsible for maintaining contacts and ties, and strengthening these local communities throughout the country.” (Expert 9)

New and traditional CSOs

It is also important to consider the relationship between organizations formed before 2020 and later. Almost all participants in the study stressed that there is a difference between organizations akin to a generational shift. This does not imply that the newly-formed CSOs consist exclusively of young people (that is, we are not talking literally about a generation gap). The survey results found that there are people of all generations in both segments.

The generational difference manifests in different understandings about the norms, goals and methods for conducting social activities, even in terms of their respective approaches to communication. At the same time, experts noted that there is a mutual movement of generations towards each other, the erasure of boundaries between segments, although this process is still far from complete.

“Generation gaps have always existed in Belarus. Now, since everyone is in a situation of very close forced interaction, this process is a little different [than before]. The generation of traditional NGOs is increasingly interacting with these new initiatives that carry a new ethos — a different type of relationship, different ideas, different values. I don’t know if it happens willingly or forcedly, but this surely is a factor that promotes [civil society’s] development.” (Expert 8).

Service CSOs and other civil society actors

CSO representatives living in Belarus immediately spoke of how acute the security issue had become. They state that any contacts about civic activism carry the risk of being detained yourself, or bringing harm on a team member.⁵ However, according to the same testimonies, the people who have made their choice to stay in Belarus over the past two and a half years and who have continued to engage in civic activism still look for these contacts.

First of all, the interaction takes place through personal connections and face-to-face meetings, using all available security methods.

⁵ One interview took place several days later than initially agreed — the respondent had been serving an administrative detention in the meantime.

You go to some city to visit people you know, and there you find people whom you see for the first time ever, and it turns out they have created such groups around them as well. This is very important, and I cannot help but wonder how this circle is expanding today, despite all the difficulties.” (A respondent from Belarus)

A second means of introduction to a new CSO in Belarus is through a trusted person or organization located outside of Belarus. The trusted contact will be accumulating information about the activities and needs of individual communities, and, according to several testimonies, the role of such umbrella structures is increasing.

“The problem of the interaction of organizations within Belarus with each other is that everything has gone underground and you simply may not know what is happening next to you, [is this person/activity] alive or not. Therefore, when there are such umbrellas [umbrella organizations] that can collect information, then in some form lower it back to the ground, to Belarusian soil, this is a very valuable function, because it allows, among other things, Belarusians themselves to be informed about what is happening around them.” (Expert 8)

“We need to count [CSOs]: doctors, students, diasporas, volunteers, yards — this is what I specifically know about, almost a dozen umbrella organizations, it turns out.” (Expert 3)

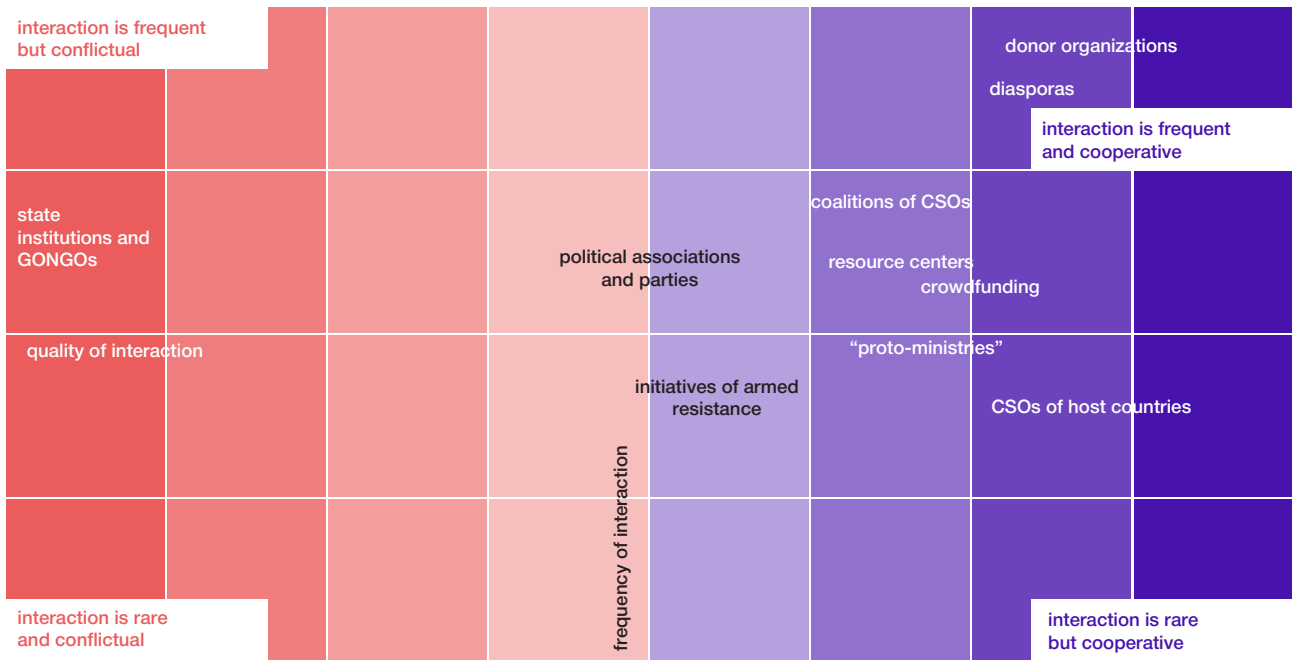
Among the Belarusian service CSOs that emigrated in full or in part from Belarus, we managed to obtain a quantitative assessment of the frequency and quality of interactions they had with all the above-mentioned civil society actors. In the focus groups that were held in Warsaw, Vilnius and Tbilisi, we asked the participants to indicate what types of organizations they had experience of interacting with. They were also asked to describe the nature of the interaction: conflictual, neutral contact or cooperative. Below is a summary of the results for 21 CSOs (see Figure 2)⁶.

⁶ In particular, the coordinates of each element in the figure have been obtained as follows:

- 1) Vertical axis (“Frequency of interaction”, scale from 0 to 100): calculate the total number of facts of interaction of all service CSOs with the specified entity; divide the result by the total number of CSOs; multiply the result by 100 (in fact, this is the proportion of CSOs that had experience of interacting with the specified subject);
- 2) Horizontal axis (“Quality of interaction”, scale from -100 to +100): conflict experience = -1, neutral contact = 0, cooperation = +1; calculate the sum of facts of interaction of all service CSOs, taking into account these “weights”; divide the result by the unweighted sum; multiply the result by 100.

However, taking into account that all calculations were made basing on the data from only 21 CSOs, we do not give specific numerical values of the scales and propose that the information presented be treated as no more than, but also no less than, a generalization of the group discussions. Some of the theses were verified in the course of a survey of 82 CSOs.

Figure 2. Relations of service CSOs with other subjects and stakeholders of civil society (according to focus group results)



From Figure 2 we can see that the majority of service CSOs (from among the focus group participants) had experience of interaction with donor organizations and with diasporas, and these interactions were mostly seen as a positive experience (cooperation worked out). Good relations were also formed with CSOs in countries accepting Belarusian immigrants, but not all CSOs are looking for such interactions.

Next comes a group of organizations with different resources for CSOs: coalitions, resource centers, crowdfunding platforms, and solidarity funds (the “proto-ministries”). They have also had cooperation with service CSOs, although not as productively as in the previous case.

“We were looking for specialists through solidarity funds. Resource centers, competence centers — we try to apply there, we do not always get the answers that interest us, but we always start with this.” (A respondent from Belarus)^a

Service CSOs also communicate with democratic political forces, but cooperation often fails. Interactions are a little more successful with initiatives supporting armed resistance, although fewer CSOs interact with such initiatives to begin with.

“We have a problem of lack of synchronization with the democratic forces. I mean, we often find out post-factum that they attended some important meeting, met with super-influential politicians, to whom it was possible to voice issues that are painful for everyone, but no one consulted with us beforehand.” (Comment from a participant at the Vilnius focus group)

Relations with state institutions are predictably described as conflictual. Although this, of course, is not an open conflict.

“As for state institutions, we have not discovered any ways of cooperating with them: that is, we rather compete with them, working as counterbalance to their propaganda; we look at what they are doing but do not cooperate with them. Sometimes propaganda writes about us, and this is some sort of covert advertising.” (A respondent from Belarus)

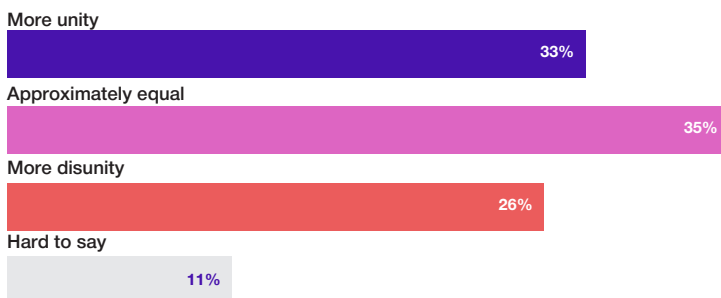
4. TENSION POINTS

Discussing relations within Belarusian civil society, it is impossible to ignore the question of unity. How united this society is in its views and what specific issues cause disagreements? This section analyzes these questions.

Asked whether there is more unity or disunity among CSO representatives today, only 28% of respondents answered that unity was the greater tendency, 35% said that there was “approximately equal” amounts of unity and disunity, 26% answered that there was “more disunity”, and 11% found it “difficult to answer” (see *Graph 2*).

Graph 2. Thinking about the people working in the entire variety of the civil society organizations of Belarus today, would you say they are characterized more by unity or disunity among them?

Total number of CSOs questioned: 82



Defining civil society's boundaries

The first big topic on which there is no unified vision among experts and CSOs is the definition of the very boundaries of civil society itself in Belarus. The main points are listed below, ordered from the least to the most tension causing.

1. (Non-)inclusion in the sector without an initiative's registration as a legal entity

For a long time CSOs in Belarus were guided by the law, which imposed criminal liability for acting on behalf of an unregistered organization — and many chose to register their activities.⁷ However, with the legal breakdown in 2020 and a mass liquidation of CSOs in 2021, the “attractiveness” of this option has decreased significantly. This factor is combined with a huge number of new initiatives started by people previously not involved with the world of “traditional” CSOs. Currently, as we wrote above, there is a process of institutionalization of new CSOs, including their mass registration outside of Belarus. Among the CSOs surveyed, 38% of initiatives are currently unregistered (including 12% of those previously registered in Belarus); and, while 62% of organizations are registered, the majority are registered outside the country (only 12% have a legal entity in Belarus).

⁷ At the same time, interviewees drew attention to the fact that, despite the law, unregistered organizations existed until 2020, and other factors had guided CSOs' choice for or against registration.

Graph 3. Is your organization registered as a legal entity?

The total number of questioned CSOs is 81 including 33 having been established in 2020-2023 (new CSOs)



In any case, it is important for analysts and donor organizations studying and supporting civil society in Belarus to clarify their position on this issue.

2. Attachment to the territory of Belarus

The mass emigration of Belarusian CSOs in 2020-2022 puts their various stakeholders in a position to reassess or reformulate old definitions. What does “Belarusian” mean here: activities carried out on the territory of Belarus, for Belarusian citizens, on behalf of Belarusian citizens, or something else? For example, organizations involved in purely humanitarian aid and assistance to Belarusian migrants — do they belong to Belarusian civil society or to the civil society of the host state?

3. Defending civil rights or uniting for any interest

This paragraph is about the need to clarify the adjective “civil”, which ultimately relates to the very purpose of CSOs. Among the study’s experts were people who advocate both the broadest definition of bringing people together on a regular basis to achieve any shared goal, and a strict definition whereby only civil rights activities “count” (with the understanding that opportunities for such activities in Belarus have been minimized). The repressive measures of the authorities in Belarus have affected hundreds of different CSOs, thus adding arguments in favor of a broader definition. However, for the donor community, this issue remains a vexed one:

“What should the goal of civil society be? [Bringing about a] change of regime, or not? When responsibility for the changes in the country starts growing, talks begin about which initiatives to support, which initiatives are needed by the country and which are not. And yes, it is necessary to decide what is needed, what can influence changes, and what will not, being just some sort of a pioneer activity.” (Expert 4)

4. (Non-)involvement of civil society in politics

All experts, as well as focus group participants, noted the mutual influence of political and civil structures. They described it in different ways: some said that political actors were entering the territory of civil society, while others, on the contrary, that civil society was beginning to “directly press on the political sector” (Expert 3). One way or another, in most cases, experts agreed that it is difficult to draw a line between political and civil “sectors” at this point in time, and some insisted that there is no way to do so.

“This is a formal division [between] political and civil sectors according to absolutely unclear criteria, and it does not facilitate the development of Belarus. In Belarus, there will be no politics until the moment of holding the first free elections, and then it will be possible to understand who chose the path of being a political party and has claims for power, and who remained in the civil sector and works for internal changes [to the country] through the instruments of civil associations.” (Expert 9)

Other disagreements

In addition to the debate over what should and should not be classified as a civil society organization, there are a few other disagreements within the sector:

5. Divisions over political preferences:

“There are those who seem to be against the Office [of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya] and others like them, but there are those who are neither for nor against the Office. Conventionally, BySol is sort of an independent organization, the Sports Solidarity Foundation is also an independent organization, but they have relationships with the Office and do not publicly criticize them, hence those who are against the Office conclude that all of them are also with the Office.” (Expert 1)

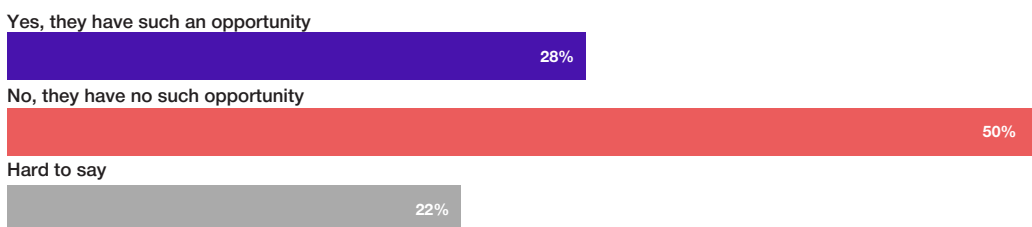
6. (Non-)cooperation of CSOs with state institutions in Belarus

Half of the survey participants (50%) answered that they do not see any opportunities for defending the interests of their groups within Belarus today. And this is easy to understand: regardless of other motives, the sheer scale of the liquidation of CSOs in Belarus means that few still have the opportunity for such activities on behalf of an organization.

However, a significant proportion of respondents (28%) believe that opportunities remain, and 12% have even made attempts in the past year (see Graphs 4 and 5). Namely, they acted as lawyers in courts, wrote comments on draft laws, helped citizens draft appeals to local authorities, and organized campaigns to collect signatures for solving local problems. In addition, one respondent shared her successful experience of coordinating a public event in Belarus (she was surprised by her successful experience).

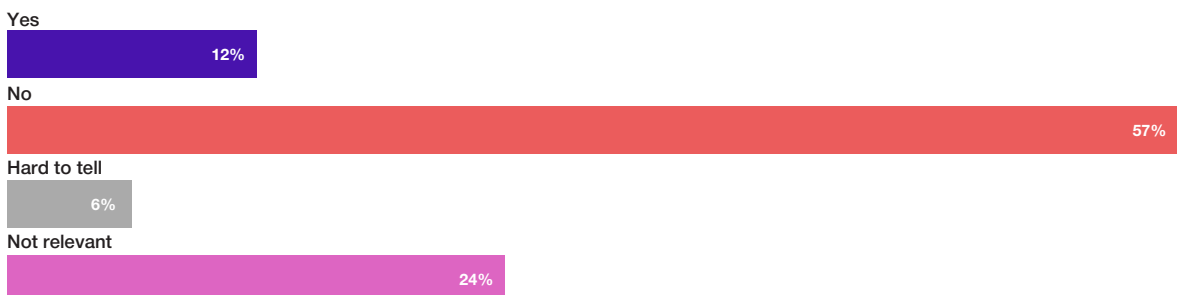
Graph 4. In your opinion, do any civil society organizations of Belarus still have an opportunity of defending the interests of their target groups inside the country by interaction with the state institutions, or is there no such an opportunity anymore?

The total number of questioned CSOs is 82



Graph 5. Did your organization have to defend the interests of your target audience in Belarus through interaction with state institutions during the last year (since April 2022)?

The total number of questioned CSOs is 82, the sum of the answers displayed on the graph is 99% instead of 100% due to rounding of the numbers



At the same time, experts stressed that the current government is active in creating its own civil society: as such, they are evaluating changes being made to a number of laws (e.g. “On Local Government and Self-Government”, “On the Fundamentals of State Youth Policy”). An example was also given of CSOs switching to the side of GONGOs (Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations): an environmental organization began to broadcast the position of the state, which clearly contradicts the position of an independent environmental community.

Experts are inclined to believe that cases of cooperation between CSOs and the state are isolated at present, but they recognize that the situation could change in the future.

“In this sense, we now have complacency and unity, because everyone is unanimous that no one is particularly going to cooperate with the regime. But let’s imagine that Lukashenka offers some kind of thaw and some kind of cooperation. I can very well imagine that organizations can be divided into those that say: “No, no way, until absolute victory, until he leaves completely,” while others would say that we must use the opportunities that exist, act with the fact that is, and they will cooperate on some conditions. I imagine this as a possible line of split: like, we don’t want to play politics, our job is to clean the rivers there, and if we are given the opportunity to clean the rivers, we will clean the rivers, and whoever wants to engage in politics, you have your own plot there. So potentially this is a dividing line.” (Expert 2)

7. (Un-)admissibility of forceful methods

Perhaps the most divisive issue on the agenda of the Belarusian civil society participants at the moment is the admissibility of using force to achieve the democratization of Belarus.

“What the Cyber Partisans are doing is illegal and criminal in any country in the world. There are also some underground organizations that call themselves civil society and resort to violence or terrorist methods of action. And at the same time, other organizations recognize their status as civil society. This is a completely new situation for the Belarusian social landscape [and our] contemporary history.” (Expert 5)

Summarizing the relationships between different participants in Belarusian civil society, several experts noted that, despite all the disagreements, participants observe a **tendency to synchronize strategies** within the “protest direction”. In other words, among those CSOs who directly declare democratic changes in Belarus as the ultimate goal of their activities, there is a recognition of the need to act in harmony.

“In general, there is a desire for synchronization. Not melting into each other [becoming one solid structure], but building a dense [network of] communication, because there is a clear vision that it is necessary to unite, to communicate. And it is getting stronger.” (Expert 3)

“There is some kind of, let’s call it, synergy, some kind of process around the provision of answers. And dialogues are being built between seemingly irreconcilable ideological opponents.” (Expert 6)

“The Coordinating Council in this sense could have become the ground where these painful spots are being found and worked on. The ground where various initiatives could unite, both political and non-political, and nearly political, in order to synchronize their watches and elaborate a common strategy. Of course, none of us know the extent to which it will work out.” (Expert 7)

II. THE NEEDS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

1. PRIORITY NEEDS

During the survey, representatives of Belarusian CSOs were offered a list of 59 problematic situations, grouped into 7 domains (reflecting different aspects of their work); this list was preliminarily compiled with the help of experts and CSO representatives through focus groups and interviews. The priorities presented in the table below (29 in total, of which 8 are of the first order) were identified based on the respondents' answers about the frequency of encountering a particular problem situation in the course of their work and its complexity in terms of the CSO's ability to solve it independently. Thus, the table lists the most urgent problems of Belarusian CSOs, identifying those for which outside assistance is especially in demand. Subsequent sections of the report provide specific illustrations of the challenges CSOs face and suggest possible solutions.

Table 1. Priority needs of Belarusian CSOs

Domain	<i>First priority problems: issues faced by most CSOs, which cannot be solved by CSOs on their own</i>	<i>Second priority problems: issues faced by fewer CSOs, which cannot be solved by CSOs on their own</i>	<i>Third priority problems: issues faced by most CSOs, but which can often be solved by CSOs on their own</i>
Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical and/or psychological issues among team members • Repressions against team members or their families, or the threat of such repressions • Shortage of specialists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties obtaining visas for team members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in the team's motivation to work • Lack of opportunities for team development
Working with target groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrowing opportunities for interaction with target groups • Growing risks / fear of interaction between target groups and CSOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced interest of target groups in CSO activities • Unwillingness of target groups to participate in long-term projects 	
Attracting resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties in raising money to support the operation of the organization as such (employee salaries and administrative expenses outside of project activities) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of feedback from the donor(s) when funding has been refused • Donor(s) reporting requirements/procedures are often/sometimes inadequate in the current conditions • Limited sources of financing • Lack of funding and/or poor material and technical base 	
Advocacy domestically and internationall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties in defending the interests of target groups within Belarus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to defend the interests of Belarusians in a host country • The need to defend the interests of the organization when registering in a new country • The need to defend the interests of Belarusians in international corporations 	
External communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impossibility of talking about the activities of CSO publicly due to security concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties in building relationships with the Belarusian media • Difficulties in promoting the values/ideas of CSOs against the prevalence of opposite values in society 	

Domain	<i>First priority problems: issues faced by most CSOs, which cannot be solved by CSOs on their own</i>	<i>Second priority problems: issues faced by fewer CSOs, which cannot be solved by CSOs on their own</i>	<i>Third priority problems: issues faced by most CSOs, but which can often be solved by CSOs on their own</i>
Relations with colleagues by sector		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information on colleagues who remain in Belarus and what they are doing • Unsatisfactory quality of contact with democratic political forces • Competition for donor financing 	
Administration and planning			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impossibility of long-term planning • Giving up certain activities due to security reasons • The need to redefine the organization's goals and working methods • Difficulties in organizing the work of a team living in different countries

2. TEAM

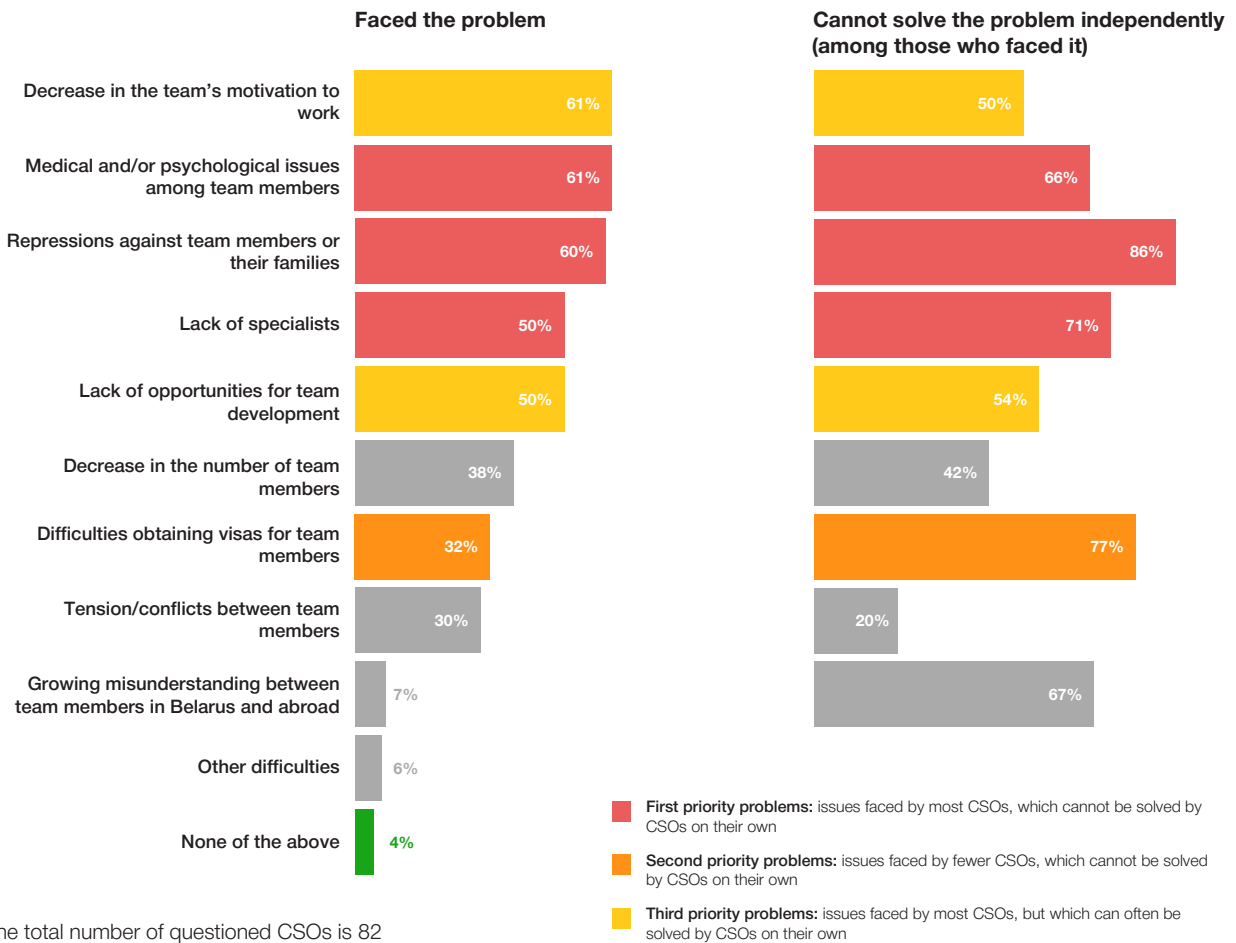
Most of the unmet needs of Belarusian CSOs today are associated with teamwork. First of all, there is a need to ensure the personal safety of employees and volunteers given the current level of repression in the country, to overcome the psychological (and sometimes medical) consequences of working in traumatic conditions, as well as to find and attract new specialists. Problems related to teamwork arose for the majority of respondents, and the capacity of CSOs was often not enough to solve them. In addition, a third of organizations faced difficulties in obtaining visas for employees and volunteers, despite the fact that the ability to quickly leave the country is perceived as an important security measure.

The current context has also narrowed the opportunities for CSOs to influence changes inside Belarus. That has a negative effect on the motivation of employees since it undermines the fundamental goals of their activities. The difficulties of adapting in emigration and insufficient earnings also have negative effects on motivation. Therefore, reduced team motivation, together with a lack of opportunities for development (compared to other areas), are two of the most frequently-occurring problems among CSOs today, although organizations cope with them slightly better than some other problems (see also Graph 6).

“Until the basic needs (according to Maslow’s pyramid) of our colleagues and like-minded people are addressed— they already have distracted attention, reduced cognitive abilities, every second one has PTSD, every first one has PTSD combined with depression — it is extremely difficult to think about high matters. When team members are trying to earn some money somewhere, to survive, then there is no way we can count on doing something quickly and efficiently as a united front. What I mean is that the issue of survival remains extremely acute.” (Comment from a participant at the Tbilisi focus group)

Graph 6. Problems connected with the team of an CSO

Has your organization/initiative/community come across something listed below within the last 12 months (starting from April 2022)? / To what extent is it possible for your organization to solve these problems independently?



Talking about difficulties in their work, the study participants also offered ideas for possible solutions. Here are those related to team support:

1. Possible measures to improve security: training security specialists who would work in Belarus (*“It would be perfect to send a person from the community, and preferably two, to practice somewhere abroad, where a person within 2-3 days or a week would see everything with their own eyes, talk to specialists [and then return back to the country]. We have a security officer, but he is now [constantly] abroad, which means that we, it turns out, do not have a quick access to him”*); public online resource with up-to-date security guidelines, including digital security.
2. Long-term psychological support: respondents said that they managed to get one-time free psychological consultations, but psychological problems are rarely solved at once, usually a long period of support is required.
3. Possible measures to increase team motivation: disseminate success stories through the media (*“No one particularly boasts about our achievements and gains, maybe they are afraid or don’t want to. People only tell when a party is closed or someone is arrested. But it should be the other way round — we need to maintain optimism with positive news. Of course, any mention of an individual person, that a*

stone was erected to someone’s memory, or a river has been cleaned — is dangerous, since this group can self-organize any moment. But here it is up to journalists to decide how to write about this”); sharing experience with similar initiatives (probably in safe territory); and networking with foreign CSOs.

3. WORKING WITH TARGET GROUPS

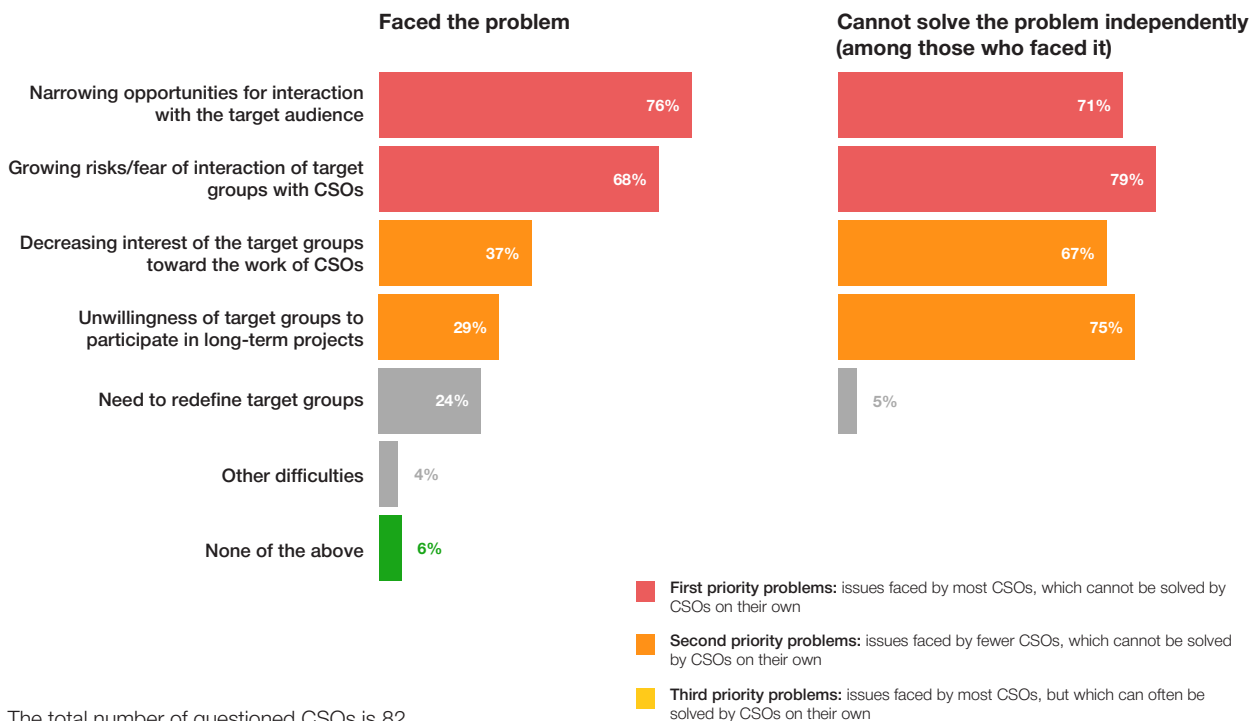
The next group of urgent needs for Belarusian CSOs concerns work with target groups. First of all, this concerns the finding of new opportunities for interaction in a situation whereby some CSOs are recognized by the current authorities as extremist, and all others can be recognized as such any moment. Moreover, a large number of Internet resources are blocked in Belarus and this complicates the problem.

“In general, we see the loss of target audiences, especially vulnerable audiences. Many websites are blocked. Vulnerable groups are not so technically advanced as to try to find us through a VPN, or it is too dangerous. If earlier some people used to make phone calls and come to the office, today they can’t”.
(Comment from a participant at the Warsaw focus group)

Slightly less common problems include declining interest of target groups in CSO activities, and their unwillingness to participate in long-term projects. These are, however, also among the priority issues where CSOs need help in finding solutions (see also Graph 7).

Graph 7. Problems connected with working with target groups

Has your organization/initiative/community come across something listed below within the last 12 months (starting from April 2022)? / To what extent is it possible for your organization to solve these problems independently?



The total number of questioned CSOs is 82

Often, the issue of reaching the target audience is resolved through personal contacts of CSO employees.

“We often hear from the target audience that now only face-to-face, human-to-human contact works. Only personal trust remains.” (Comment from a participant at the Tbilisi focus group)

4. ATTRACTING RESOURCES

The need for funding is not a new one for Belarusian CSOs, as for CSOs in any other country. What distinguishes the current situation is the reduction in funding sources due to the inability to operate openly in the country and the increased costs of maintaining an organization in exile. Now the need to attract money to support the work of an organization as such, instead of project financing (or together with it), has become especially urgent.

“Earlier, you took money only for some project activity, and you could earn a salary, but now you need everything. And the wages began to include not only wages, but also insane rents for apartments, health insurance, i.e. expenses, which, in principle, people in Belarus did not have. It all increased dramatically, and fell on the donors.” (Comment from a participant at the Tbilisi focus group)

New challenges in mobilizing resources for the work of CSOs also include the need to adapt donor requirements to the changing project environment. A third of the organizations had faced a situation of this kind.

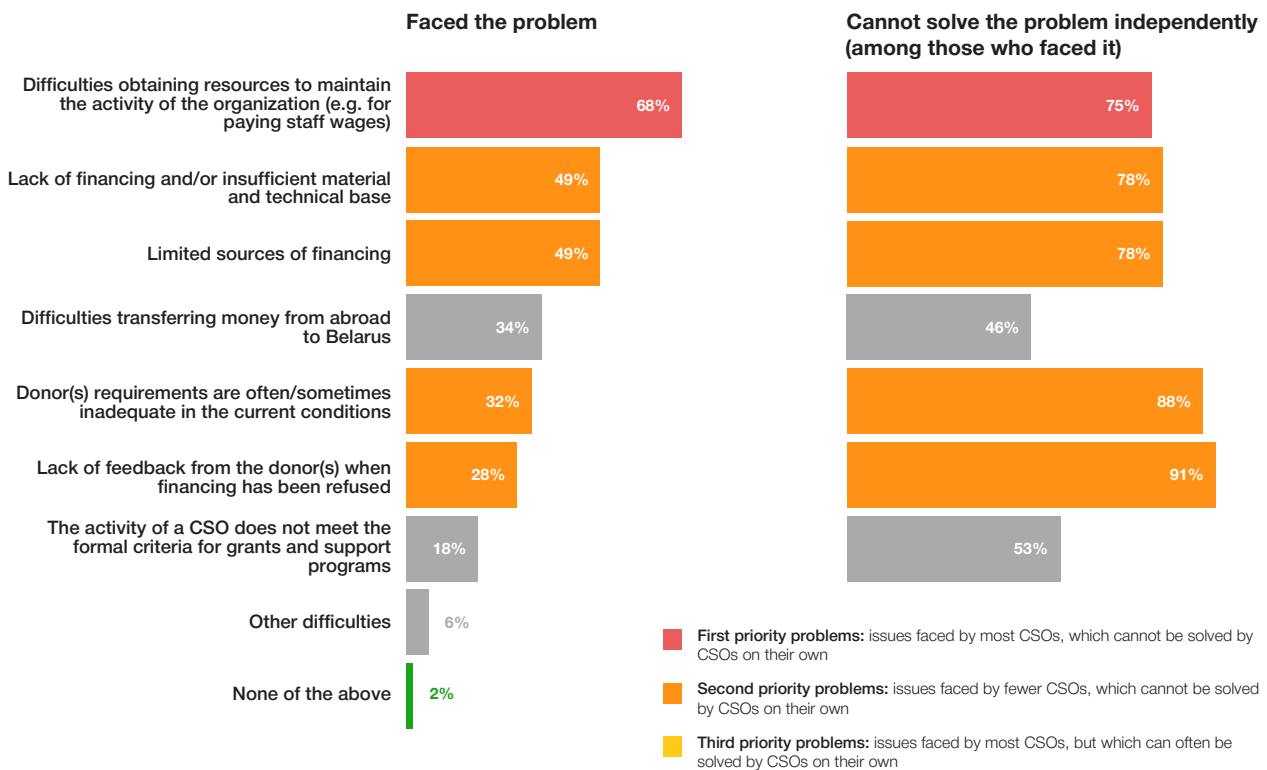
“Participation in the course involved a phone call where they [potential participants] held their passports near their faces to confirm that they are Belarusians. And I had to come up with some workarounds so that people get this service that they want to receive, and the foundation gets a wonderful amount of people from inside Belarus with whom they worked. They [the foundations], apparently, do not understand at all what situation people in Belarus are in, how low their level of trust in anyone is now.” (Comment from a participant at the Vilnius focus group)

“If we adapt to the thinking of donor-bureaucrats, then we will simply become dysfunctional and lose contact with the target group.” (Comment from a participant at the Warsaw focus group)

The lack of feedback from donors is also listed as a priority issue (also see Graph 8).

Graph 8. Problems connected with the attraction of resources

Has your organization/initiative/community come across something listed below within the last 12 months (starting from April 2022)? / To what extent is it possible for your organization to solve these problems independently?



The total number of questioned CSOs is 82

At the same time, the experts pointed out that the interest of the donor community in Belarus is quite high, but the organizations lack the competence to run large projects. This can already be seen as an opportunity for the development of CSOs themselves.

5. DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

As we wrote above, not all CSOs see an opportunity of defending the interests of their target groups in the current conditions, and this, of course, is a serious problem. What they still manage to do is to advise Belarusians inside the country on how they themselves can protect their rights.

“We have to work with national authorities. After August [2020], we decided that we would not do this, and after that it became impossible in principle due to the liquidation. There is no advocacy as such, of course we write to them, they answer us, but there is no advocacy as such. There is no work with them.”
 (Comment from a participant at the Warsaw focus group)

“Lobbying and advocacy with those who are illegitimate is extremely difficult. Therefore, here you rather instruct a person how to engage in self-advocacy. You line up... well, so that it doesn't come from you, but a person for himself, with the help of your tools.” (Comment from a participant at the Tbilisi focus group)

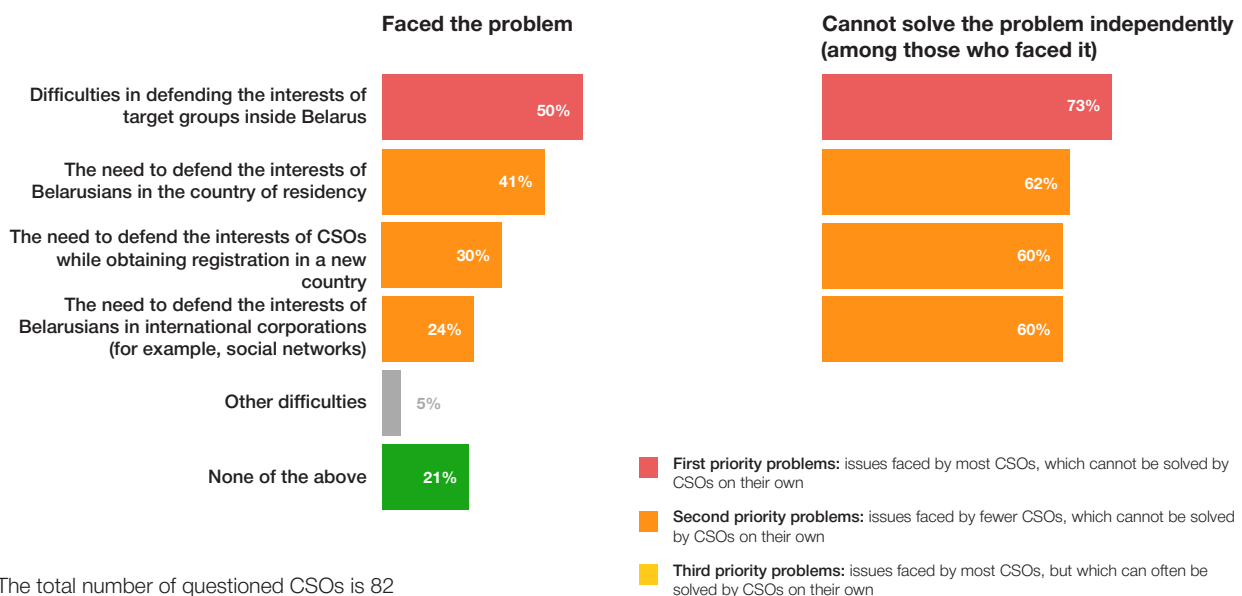
In addition, Russia's war against Ukraine and the current Belarusian government's support for Russia brought new challenges. In focus groups, CSO representatives pointed to new difficulties in upholding the rights of Belarusians

and for organizations established by Belarusians abroad: difficulties opening bank accounts, and interacting with international corporations that provide the tools needed for the CSOs' work (see also Graph 9).

“Speaking about advocacy in our sector, I would like to outline a special challenge — advocacy for [better treatment by] big tech (YouTube, Facebook, Google), which does not [help] independent media. ... Facebook, for instance, blocks political advertising, and it considers any news as politics. To create such advertising, one needs to be in Belarus. There are many problems and issues in the technical plane, and it is difficult to solve them, since these are huge corporations.” (Comment from a participant at the Warsaw focus group)

Graph 9. Problems connected with advocacy inside the country and abroad

Has your organization/initiative/community come across something listed below within the last 12 months (starting from April 2022)? / To what extent is it possible for your organization to solve these problems independently?



The total number of questioned CSOs is 82

6. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

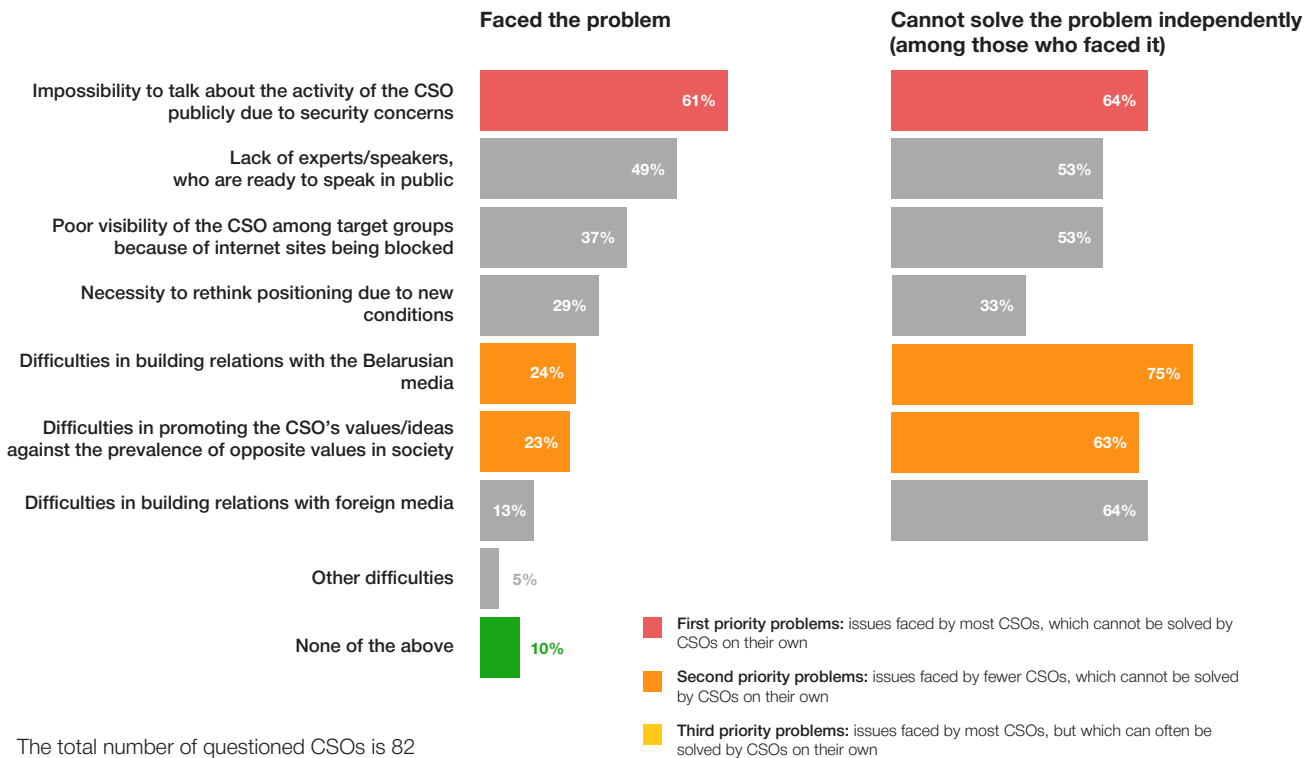
In a situation where not only the people who create the content, but also the people who consume it are being repressed, it becomes an urgent need for most CSOs to find ways to talk about their activities in a safe way for staff and the target group.

In addition, building relationships with the Belarusian media seems to be an insurmountable difficulty for a significant part of civil society. There are still topics in the public imagination where CSOs have been unable to overcome the prevailing misconceptions or stereotypes (also see Graph 10). The most typical example is the topic of gender equality, but there are others.

“The biggest headache has not changed since I have become a civil activist in the field of gender equality — the taboo around the topic of gender equality, people’s misunderstanding of the basics of feminism, understanding of feminism as abusive and something very bad.” (Comment from a participant at the Vilnius focus group)

Graph 10. Problems connected with external communication

Has your organization/initiative/community come across something listed below within the last 12 months (starting from April 2022)? / To what extent is it possible for your organization to solve these problems independently?

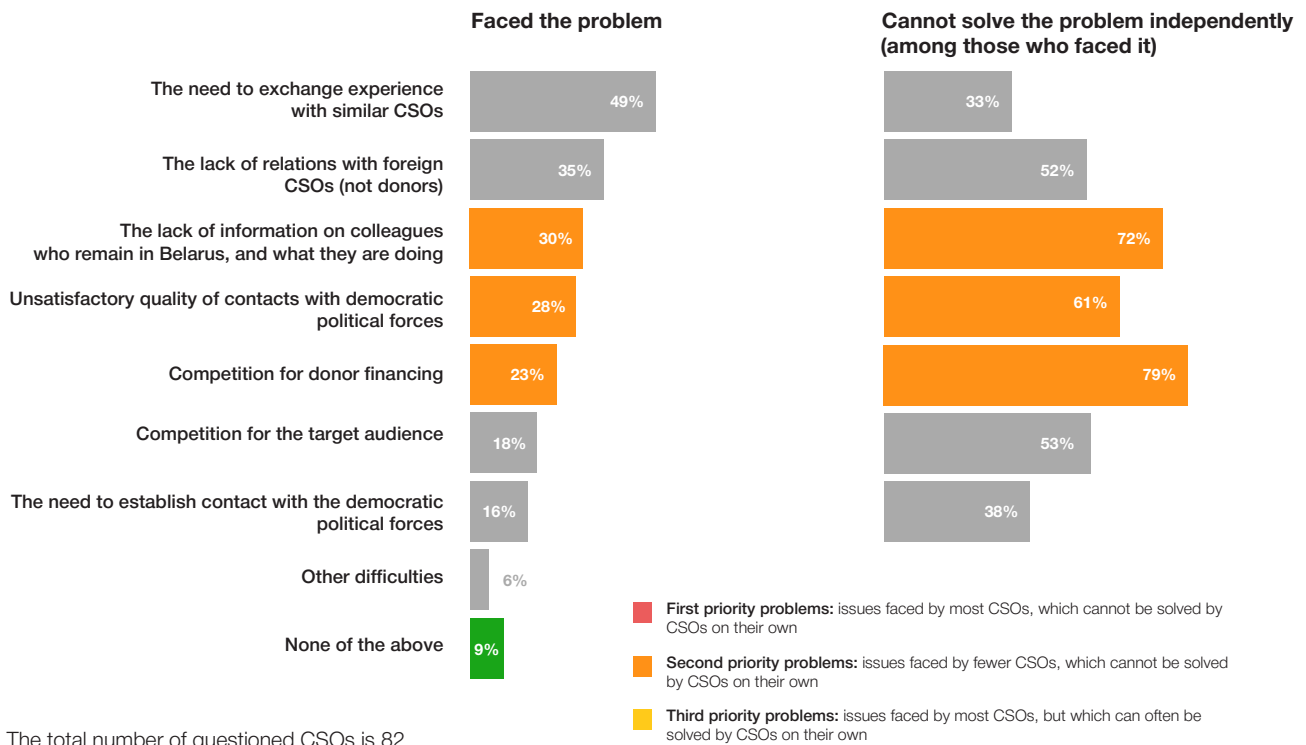


7. RELATIONS WITH COLLEAGUES BY SECTOR

This section considers the most pressing issues with regard to interaction within the sector. Issues which many CSOs face but cannot solve on their own include: lack of information about the duties performed by their colleagues inside Belarus, lack of partnerships with democratic political forces, and competition for donors (see also Graph 11).

Graph 11. Problems connected with relations with colleagues by sector

Has your organization/initiative/community come across something listed below within the last 12 months (starting from April 2022)? / To what extent is it possible for your organization to solve these problems independently?



The total number of questioned CSOs is 82

Herein, focus group participants shared positive examples of how to overcome competition for donors: by synchronizing actions within certain thematic areas (e.g. human rights, ecology, education):

“We have a positive experience from these old NGOs — those who formed earlier and with whom we partnered before 2020 in Belarus. For example, we have several mentoring programs for Belarus, which will now be launched simultaneously. We managed to get together and talk about how we can differ from each other, how we will find a USP⁸ in the media, how we will sound in the media sphere in order not to interfere with each other.” (Comment from a participant at the Tbilisi focus group)

In addition, a solution was also proposed for the problem of information exchange between different CSOs: the creation of a catalog of verified CSOs — public or closed, accessible only to a limited circle of persons who could carry out verification. The verifier must be outside Belarus:

“Some kind of coordination center, a verifier, should be located outside, which, for example, organized an offline meeting of 10-20 people from different communities somewhere abroad — verified them. They could talk, exchange contacts, something else — and so it will expand.” (A respondent from Belarus)

⁸ USP = unique selling proposition, a marketing term.

8. ADMINISTRATION AND PLANNING

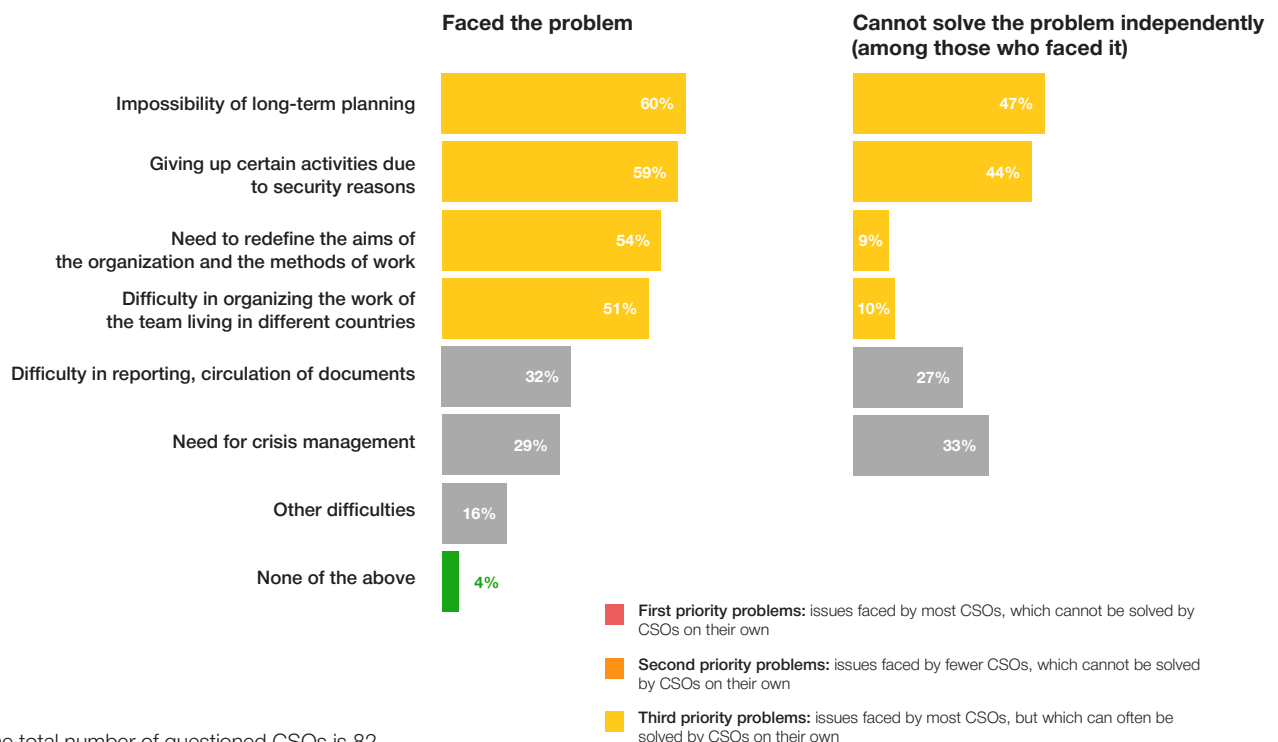
Many CSOs have had problems managing and planning their work over the past year, and in most cases they have managed to find the resources to solve these problems. They have held strategic sessions, invited mentors, and formulated internal rules and instructions. However, the external context continues to bring challenges that cast doubt on the feasibility of what is planned, so it is too early to say that all relevant needs of Belarusian CSOs are met at the moment (also see Graph 12).

“We have been holding a strategic session for a year now — We too! — We wrote down the mission, that’s all, we are trying to write down all the roles, develop a policy (I already feel bad from this word alone). At some point, we realized that we needed to turn to external experts, this started to help, but still [this strategic session is not finished yet]”. (Comment from a participant at the Vilnius focus group)

“We have developed all this: both the mission and the strategic development plan, such a step-by-step short plan, we check it every three months, but what holds us back is the uncertainty that this is really necessary for Belarus today ... ‘necessary’ is not the right word, I guess, let us say ‘effective’. I mean, whether the things we are doing abroad are effective for our region. We keep on talking about cultural heritage, and at the same time they blow it up in [some city] — and how wonderful it is, of course, that we are talking about it, but the effect is so-so.” (Comment from a participant at the Tbilisi focus group)

Graph 12. Problems connected with administration and planning of the work of a CSO

Has your organization/initiative/community come across something listed below within the last 12 months (starting from April 2022)? / To what extent is it possible for your organization to solve these problems independently?



The total number of questioned CSOs is 82

In light of the ever-changing context, one solution could be to offer Belarusian CSOs some kind of framework (or frameworks) for flexible planning and preparation for all possible negative scenarios:

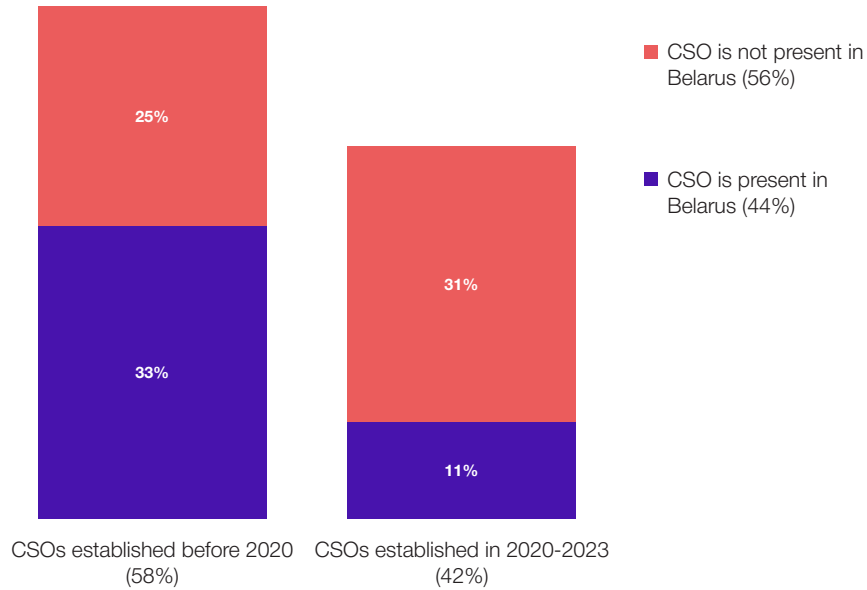
“In this situation, you can set a goal, I think, for a maximum of two years ahead. Well, some very tangible things. I think that for an organization inside Belarus, planning is generally a direct challenge. If they have not closed you down yet, then they will; or they won’t close you, but try to use you for some purpose... I think that in general, in principle, there should be some other approach, such as crisis planning. But usually they talk about crisis planning when there are internal problems in the organization, but here is a problem outside that we cannot solve, and how do we plan in these situations? Perhaps this is a task for some coaching expert community that thinks specifically about the development of organizations”.
(Expert 10)

ANNEX: PROFILE OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

In some cases, the sum of the answers displayed on the charts may be 99% or 101% instead of 100%, which is due to rounding of the numbers.

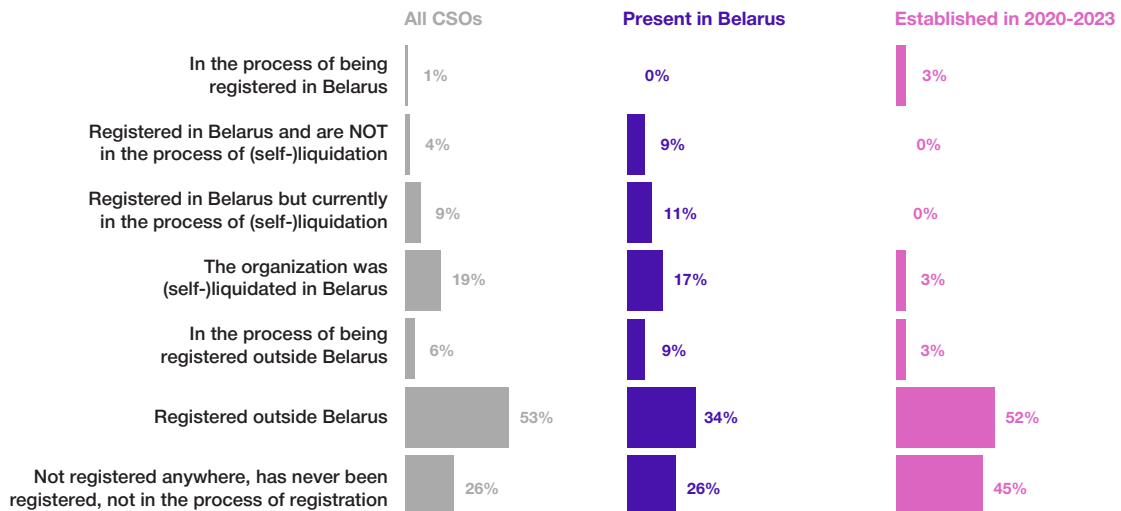
Date of CSO establishment and presence in the country today

The total number of questioned CSOs is 81 (100%)



Is your organization registered as a legal entity?

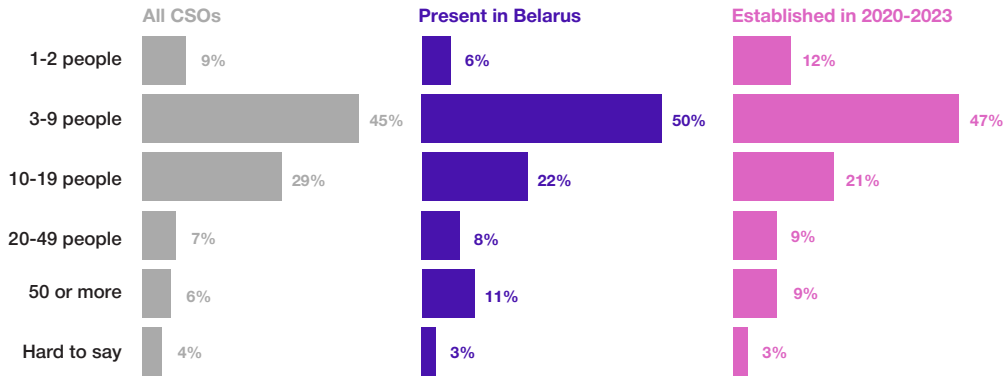
(multiple answers possible)



The total number of questioned CSOs is 81, including 35 that are still present in Belarus, 33 were established in 2020-2023 (new CSOs).

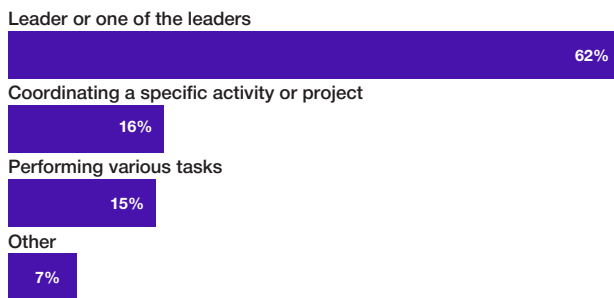
How many full-time members (workers and/or volunteers) does your organization/initiative/community have?

The total number of questioned CSOs is 82, including 36 that are still present in Belarus, 34 were established in 2020-2023 (new CSOs).



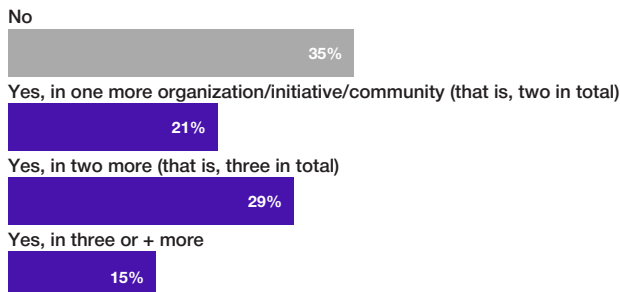
What is your main role in the organization/initiative?

Total number of questioned people is 82.



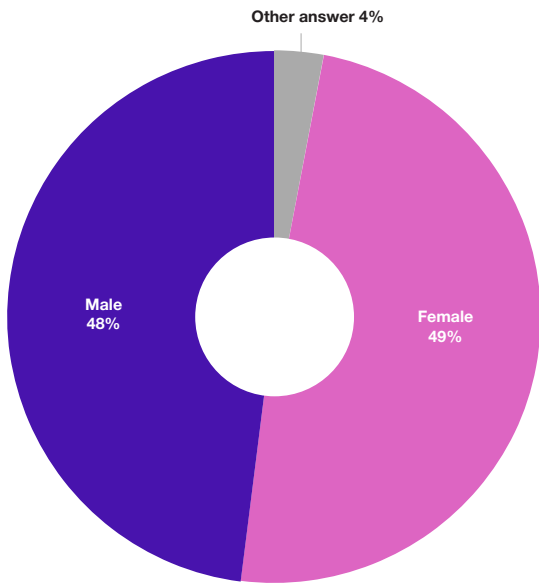
Do you regularly participate in the work of other Belarusian organizations/initiatives/communities?

Total number of questioned people is 82.



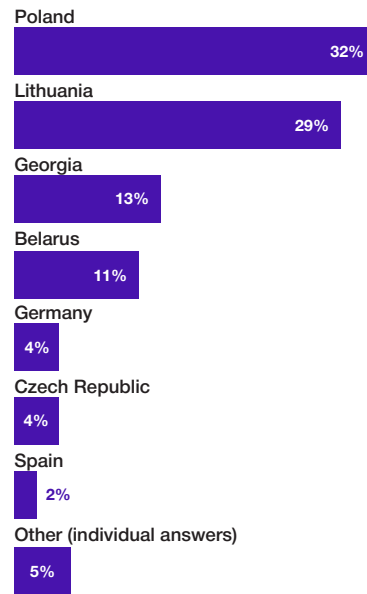
Sex

Total number of questioned people is 82.



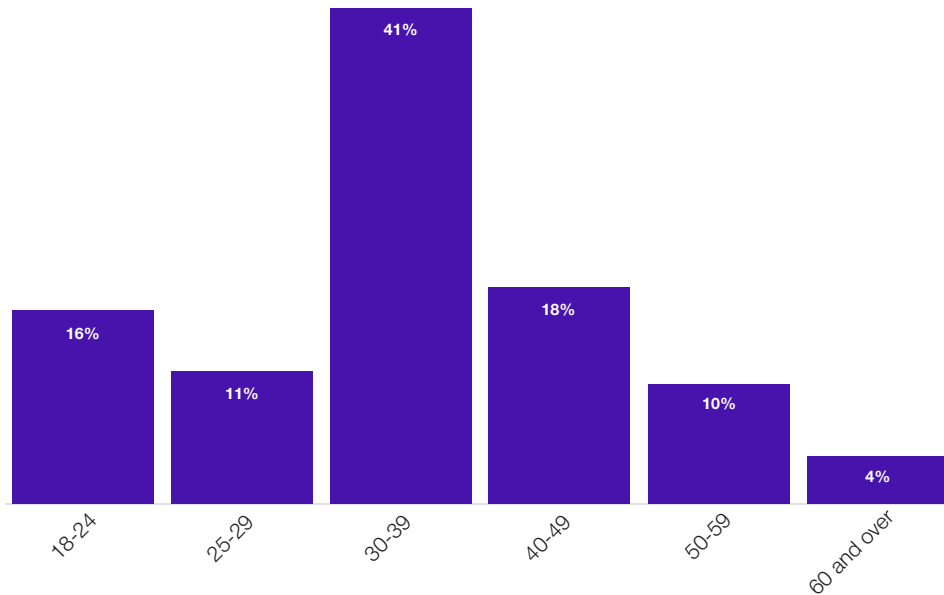
In what country do you live now?

Total number of questioned people is 82.



Age

Total number of questioned people is 82.



THE AUTHORS OF THE RESEARCH



The Center for New Ideas (newbelarus.vision) is a think tank dedicated to developing ideas on how to take advantage of the opportunities and respond to the challenges that Belarus faces in the 21st century. Our mission is to help political and social organisations build a more open, prosperous, and resilient Belarus.



The Center for European Transformation (cet.eurobelarus.info) is a Belarusian analytical and research center founded in 2010. One of the subject areas of the CET throughout its existence has been the development of civil society in Belarus.

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