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REACTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO REPRESSIONS OF  
AUTHORITARIAN REGIME. THE CASE OF BELARUS.

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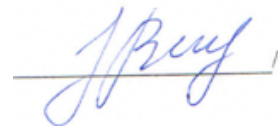
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## ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the reaction of civil society in Belarus to increased repression, worsening conditions, and shrinking space for activity from 2020 to October 2023. The research was conducted using the case study method. Thus, the state used various control and suppression measures, such as re-registration, financial, tax and administrative measures, and complex legislation regulating the activities of civil society organisations. These measures were combined with the parallel construction of a “pocket” civil society, and attempts were made to replace destroyed CSOs with pro-government organisations (GONGOs). The study shows that civil society in Belarus reacted differently to the repressive tactics used by the state. Some groups chose to freeze their activities or conduct them underground, becoming “invisible” not only to the repressive authorities but also to their local audiences. Other groups have chosen a strategy of adaptation and survival, facing, in addition to repressive practices, the difficulties of emigration and adaptation in another country. The work suggests the need for further research to deepen the topic. It provides findings useful to civil society organisations and scholars interested in civil society in non-democratic countries.

## EXTENDED SUMMARY

La tesi esamina le risposte della società civile in Bielorussia all'aumento della repressione, al deterioramento delle condizioni e alla riduzione dello spazio per le attività tra il 2020 e ottobre 2023. Utilizzando un approccio di studio di caso, la ricerca esamina varie misure di controllo e soppressione applicate dallo stato, tra cui ostacoli alla reregistrazione, misure finanziarie e fiscali, azioni amministrative e complesse normative che regolamentano le attività delle organizzazioni della società civile (OSC). Inoltre, lo Stato ha creato la “sua” società civile e ha cercato di sostituire le OSC liquidate con organizzazioni filogovernative (GONGO), ricorrendo alla repressione transnazionale.

Lo studio rivela reazioni diverse all'interno della società civile bielorussa alle tattiche repressive. La divisione tra società civile “nuova” e “vecchia”, insieme alle varie posizioni territoriali, ha portato a reazioni e strategie diverse. Le OSC che sono rimaste nel paese hanno interrotto le attività, operato clandestinamente o sono diventate “invisibili” sia alle autorità che al pubblico di riferimento. Coloro che sono partiti hanno seguito una strategia adattativa, affrontando sfide non solo legate alle pratiche repressive, ma anche alle complessità dell'emigrazione e dell'adattamento in paesi stranieri. La tesi sottolinea la necessità di ulteriori ricerche per approfondire la comprensione di queste dinamiche, fornendo preziosi spunti per le organizzazioni della società civile e per gli studiosi interessati a come esse operano nei paesi non democratici.

## GLOSSARY

BELSTAT - National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus

BRSM - Belarussian Union of Youths

CSOs - Civil Society Organisations

DFI - Department of Financial Investigation

EaP - Eastern Partnership

ECNL - The European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law

EIU - The Economist Intelligence Unit

FBI - The Federal Bureau of Investigation

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

GONGOs - Pro-Government Organisations

ICNL - The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law

KGB - The State Security Service in Belarus

NCOs - Non-Commercial Organisations

NGOs - Non-Governmental Organisations

NPOs - Non-Profit Organisations

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## PREFACE

The author of this dissertation has a personal stake in the subject matter, stemming from their extensive work experience in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Belarus over the past decade. The events of 2020 profoundly impacted the author personally and the country's civil sector and society as a whole, prompting a reevaluation of the relationship between the third sector and the state.

The relationship between the third sector and the state in Belarus has historically been complex and has gone through various phases, from “thaw” to “frost”. However, the presidential election in August 2020 marked a turning point, as mass protests and subsequent violent suppression by the authoritarian regime demonstrated an intent to suppress not only dissent but also freedom of thought and speech.

In response to the protests, the regime launched not only an intense crackdown but also, later, a large-scale campaign to liquidate NGOs, imprison their leaders, and force their staff to emigrate. This unprecedented wave of repression fundamentally changed the very nature and scope of civil society in the country. At the same time, the elections and events preceding them influenced the emergence of new actors in the sector.

From the research perspective, the focus is on the reactions and strategies adopted by civil society and its certain actors in response to the shrinking space for activity and the intensification of repression.

This topic is relevant for the academic community, as rather few researchers have studied civil society in Belarus. The results of this research also contribute to the broader study of civil society in Belarus and the understanding of civil society in authoritarian countries.



## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a worrying trend of shrinking space for civil society activities around the world. This is a phenomenon not only observed in authoritarian countries but also democracies. While some states seek to tighten only the legislation regulating the activities of NGOs, others resort to more sophisticated repressive methods, including transnational repression of civil society activists. The global tightening of repression against civil society is indeed alarming, and Belarus, as an authoritarian country, is not an exception.

As an authoritarian country, Belarus has always maintained complex relations with civil society, ranging from non-systemic repression to limited cooperation on specific topics like ecology or people with disabilities. The events that took place in the world and the country in 2020 became very significant for the entire civil society in the broad sense of the word.

In 2020, when the authorities completely ignored the threat of the COVID-19 epidemic and did not take almost any necessary protective measures while additionally hiding and distorting statistics on the number of people who fell ill and died, there was a sharp upsurge of public activity in the country. People actively cooperated for joint actions such as sewing masks and providing assistance to hospitals. This activity, which started as a reaction to the crisis, gradually developed into a full-fledged large-scale political mobilisation of civil society in 2020.

The 2020 presidential election campaign in Belarus has been a topic of widespread discussion and interest among the public. The people who were previously indifferent to the elections have taken an active interest in the election race. They have formed initiative groups, collected signatures for alternative candidates, and organised rallies and pickets. Like many previous ones, the presidential election held in August 2020 was marred by massive violations and falsifications. However, this time, the scale of these violations led to unexpectedly enormous protests across the country, which were violently suppressed by the authorities.

These events marked the beginning of significant changes in politics, economy, and society, as well as a reorganisation of civil society in Belarus, expressed in the emergence of new structures and actors. The repressions that followed after that just strengthened the crystallisation process of the “new” civil society.

The question of how actively the reformatted civil society of Belarus reacted and continues to react to the intensification of repressions, what formats and tactics activists and organisations choose, and whether they choose them at all is a pressing one. This study has been conducted to explore how civil society in Belarus responds to the intensification of repression, deterioration of conditions, and restriction of opportunities for activity. For this purpose, we formulated the

research question: **“How does civil society react to the intensification of repressions, deterioration of conditions and shrinking space for activity on the example of Belarus?”**.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, the study is limited to the period from 2020 to October 2023. This timeframe has been chosen as it allows us to observe and analyse the emergence of new civic actors and the transformation of existing ones. It also provides us with the opportunity to examine the full scope of the state's repressive tactics and how civil society responds to them. While analysing the current situation, the study also recognises the importance of considering the historical context of the relationship between the state and civil society in Belarus. Therefore, a brief overview of this relationship since 1994 has also been included in the study.

There is a need in academia to know and understand more about civil society in non-Western, non-democratic countries. Sherif (2018) argues that it is crucial to raise awareness on how civil society functions in pursuit of greater democracy and respect for human rights outside Western democracies. The relevance of researching this topic is increasing as the space for civil society worldwide is shrinking (Unmüßig, 2016). Therefore, the case study of civil society in Belarus and its survival strategies in response to state repression aims to fill this “gap” partially and contribute to a better understanding of civil society in non-Western, non-democratic countries.

### *Method and Methodology*

In this paper, we chose the case study as the most appropriate research method because it allows us to focus on a narrow topic within the given parameters, which in our case means focusing on the reactions of civil society in response to the repression of the authoritarian Belarusian state, taking into account the repressive strategies used by the state.

The research was conducted using an extensive range of scientific sources, which were analysed to form the study's theoretical basis. The scientific literature and secondary sources used in the research considered fundamental concepts such as “civil society”, “authoritarianism”, “shrinking space”, “repression”, and “transnational repression”.

In operationalising the concept, an attempt was made to eliminate all ambiguities and vagueness of the concept for use in the empirical part of the study.

Furthermore, in the empirical part of the study, at least 12 research, monitors and surveys on civil society were analysed. All these studies were conducted between 2020 and October 2023, primarily by independent Belarusian academics and research centers. Although some of the sources are publicly available, some of them have not been published and have been disseminated

exclusively to civil society representatives and donors due to their sensitive nature. The author of this study had the opportunity to familiarise himself with this confidential data.

However, the use of the case study method has several limitations. One such limitation is that the results of a study conducted using this method may not be easily extended to other contexts due to their narrow and country-specific nature. It is also difficult to generalise the results.

In addition, we faced some other limitations. For instance, we chose not to include data from non-public research due to its sensitivity and the potential harm it could cause civil society organisations working in a country where repression continues and where the state actively seeks such information to reinforce its repressive strategies. Another limitation, on the one hand, and an advantage on the other, is that the author of the study is very familiar with the topic of the civil society sector in the country. The author tried to keep the research as neutral as possible and remained impartial to minimise bias.

The thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework that explores the concept of civil society and its development over time. This chapter also examines the relationship between civil society and authoritarian states, focusing on the concepts of shrinking space, repression, and transnational repression. The second chapter is the empirical part, which focuses on the case of Belarus and its civil society. The chapter begins with general information about the country, which is ruled by an authoritarian government. It then briefly describes civil society in the country and its conditions. The concept of civil society is operationalised for the specific context of Belarus, with a historical overview of the relationship between the government and civil society provided. The chapter then delves into the four-year period from 2020 to October 2023, examining the global and local context in detail. The focus is on the state's main repressive tactics, civil society transformation trends, and their reactions and survival strategies. The conclusions of the research paper summarise the findings of the analysis and identify the leading trends and reactions of the third sector to the state's unprecedented repressive measures.

## CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FRAME & LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Civil society

#### 1.1.1. Definition of civil society

The first definitions of civil society, borrowed from political theory, are found in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville. Later, when entering the field of sociology, the concept was also considered by critical thinkers such as Marx, Gramsci, and Hegel. More recently, the idea of “civil society” has entered human rights and development discourses and has diverse meanings. As such, the concept has undergone many changes over time and in different national contexts and is arguably one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences today.

Conceptual ideas about civil society are diverse, and no single and universally accepted definition exists. Nevertheless, there is a widespread understanding that “modern civil society is the sum of institutions, organisations, and individuals in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests other than pure economic or political gain” (Anheier & Toepler 2023, p.82).

According to Edwards (2004) civil society can be interpreted as “a part of society where it constitutes associational life; a type of society in which trust, non-violence and cooperation are essential values; [and] a space for civic action and engagement that offers room for rational dialogue and active citizenship”. Baker (1999, p.2) complements this by saying that civil society can be interpreted as “a number of non-state institutions or an analytical tool that accounts for democracy and the change of democratic strength in a region”. Another frequently cited scholar in this field, Larry Diamond (1994), adds that civil society is “the realm of organised social life that is open, voluntary, bound by a legal order or a set of shared rules”.

The common thread uniting the diverse definitions is that civil society is a space for voluntary association and activism that exists to some extent independent of the state and the market (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Salamon et al., 2004).

Civil society has been studied from various sociological perspectives. These perspectives range from a narrow “third sector” view that focuses solely on the domain defined by institutions (Evers & Laville, 2004; Brandsen et al., 2005) to a strategic action field perspective that views civil society as a network of organisations that operate based on shared goals, relationships, and rules (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; 2012). Gellner (1994, p.5) defines the organisational aspect of civil society as “that set of nongovernmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state, and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of peace and arbitrator

between major interests, can nevertheless prevent the state from dominating and atomising the rest of society”.

Some approaches also view civil society as an “arena” where citizens pursue their interests, as seen in the works of Gramsci and neo-Gramscianists (Buttigieg, 1995). Civil society can also be seen as a sphere that encompasses a variety of norms, legal codes, institutions, and public opinion through which civic identity finds expression (Alexander & Tognato, 2018).

In modern democratic societies, civil society comprises a diverse range of groups and communities that operate independently of the government. This includes NGOs, trade unions, indigenous peoples' organisations, charitable institutions, religious organisations, professional associations, and foundations. These groups play a vital role in supporting and protecting various social groups and public concerns and are often referred to as the “third sector”. Civil society is considered an essential element of a thriving democracy and serves several crucial functions.

In summary, scholars widely accept that civil society constitutes a distinct social sphere that operates outside the realm of state and market influence. While there is ongoing debate regarding the precise definition of civil society - whether it should be viewed as a sphere or an active agent - the institutional paradigm, which emphasises the forms and organisations of civil society, is the lens through which this paper approaches the subject. We must only partially rely on the abovementioned definitions because civil society in authoritarian countries has its own peculiarities. Some civil society organisations, for example, may not be separate from the state. More details about the types of civil society organisations will be discussed below.

However, to better understand what civil society is, it is necessary to turn to its historical context first.

### **1.1.2. The historical context of the civil society concept**

#### *Classical Era*

The concept of civil society has a rich history that can be traced back to ancient Rome. Cicero, a prominent Roman statesman, employed the term to describe a political community that was comprised of more than one city and functioned according to the law. This community differed from barbaric tribes and was perceived as a space for civic activity.

During ancient times in Greek city-states, individuals who were white and male had the privilege to participate in governance and ruling responsibilities. Furthermore, civil society was composed of a limited number of citizens who had the authority to take part in decision-making.

Civil society was considered a platform for civic engagement, where the state was responsible for enabling its existence, leading to an inseparable relationship between the state and society (Edwards, 2004, p.6).

#### *From the Enlightenment to 1989*

Throughout the Enlightenment period, the concept of civil society underwent significant changes. It was perceived as a voluntary association of citizens who demanded the defence of individual rights and freedoms that were discovered during the Age of Enlightenment. Scholars such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke introduced social and moral dimensions to the state's legitimacy or authority. Unlike the ancient Greek view of society as a product of political institutions, Hobbes and Locke believed that society existed before political power emerged.

Adam Smith, an eighteenth-century Scottish economist, conceptualised civil society as a result of developing an independent commercial order. According to Smith, this order gave rise to interrelationships between individuals pursuing their interests and the “public sphere”, where the general interests of society are shaped. He suggested that society has opinions on matters of common interest and that this “public opinion”, expressed in public forums such as newspapers, coffee houses, and political meetings, can influence elections and political decisions (Edwards, 2004, p.6).

Philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, a prominent representative of 19th-century German idealism, presented a novel conception of civil society, separating it from political society. In contrast to the classical republican understanding of civil society as synonymous with political society, Hegel, like Alexis de Tocqueville in his book “Democracy in America”, emphasised the separate functions of civil and political society. He argued that associations could solve problems independently without state intervention. Hegel viewed civil society as a separate sphere, a “system of needs” between the family and the state (Edwards, 2004, p.13).

Since its revival in the 1980s, the concept of civil society has gained significant attention for its role in promoting democracy, justice, and citizen participation. Scholars have noted that civil society has played an essential role in transitions, contributing to the destruction of authoritarian regimes and strengthening democratic regimes.

#### *Post 1989: the Transition Paradigm*

In the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the resulting changes in the geopolitical environment, the so-called “third wave of democratisation”

(Huntington, 1993, p.13) or what Salamon (1994, p.113) called the “global associational revolution” generated considerable optimism about the role of civil society in the development of democracy. Building on Tocqueville's conception, civil society was seen as an integral element of liberal democracy (Diamond, 1994; Gellner, 1994). This idea became particularly relevant in Eastern European intellectual circles.

At this time, Western states and transnational donors began to actively fund non-profit organisations (NPOs) and other civil society institutions in the Global South and former communist countries. They aimed to spread liberal values, promote democratisation, and stimulate development (Barnett, 2011; Dietrich & Wright, 2015). This aid was embedded in the international development assistance provided by rich countries to less developed states. While much of this aid has been channelled through government agencies, a significant portion has reached targets through local NGOs. As a result, the number of foreign-funded non-governmental organisations were working in developing countries increased significantly, including large transnational and local organisations (Carothers & Ottaway, 2005, p.146; Murdie, 2014, p.788; Reimann, 2006, p.667). Many donors saw such support as a kind of 'miracle cure' (Edwards & Hulme, 1996, p.963), capable of solving many problems that developing states and the market could not address themselves.

At the same time, many governments considered such assistance to NGOs working in their territories as a complement to their service delivery efforts and as additional funding in the context of limited budgets. Meanwhile, civil society became a staple of academic thought on democratic transitions and a familiar part of the discourse of global institutions, leading non-governmental organisations, and Western governments. (Ishkanian, 2007).

The concept of civil society has been widely discussed and viewed as a crucial element in achieving democratic transition and political change. Civil society was recognised as a goal and a tool to achieve that goal. Examples of successful revolutions in Latin America and Eastern Europe, where civil society organisations (CSOs) such as labour unions, churches, and human rights activist groups played a leading role in the democratic transition, have supported the idea that a robust civil society can facilitate political change and topple authoritarian regimes (Aarts & Cavatorta, 2013).

In order to understand the theoretical framework of this critical period, it is essential to explore the two main approaches to civil society presented by Lewis (2014, p.66-70). The liberal approach, which emerged as part of the idea of good governance in the 1990s, draws on the neo-Tocqueville schools that emphasize the role of civil society in established democracies. This approach stresses cooperation between civil society and the state, believing that political change

can occur through reforms rather than revolutions. It reflects a balanced relationship between civil society and the state.

In contrast, the radical approach considers civil society as a participant in contested politics, seeking conflict and competition for power with the state. It draws on the ideas of Gramsci and the Neo-Gramscian school, which emphasise civil society's fight to limit the state's power and protect the rights of citizens. Civil society plays the role of a resistance sphere, defending people's rights against authoritative states.

Apart from these two approaches, there is also a “status quo” or “system maintenance” view based on Seibel's (1989, p.37) “soft weakness” argument, which sees civil society as a means of providing services as a preventative measure to prevent structural reforms and suppress revolutionary movements.

It is worth noting that the role of civil society, until the mid-1990s, was primarily defined as a necessary condition for liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 2001, p.13). During this time, society was often seen as a force opposed to state power. However, as new data and circumstances emerged, this view of the role of civil society began to evolve. For example, in Arab countries, Africa, and some post-Soviet states, the growth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has not led to democratic change. This has led to a redefinition of civil society as a democratic ingredient capable of freeing people from authoritarianism.

### *Post-transitory Period*

The global “pushback” against democracy and the juxtaposition of civil society and non-democratic governments has raised doubts about civil society's ability to promote sustainable democratisation. In addition, governments in poor and middle-income countries have started to pass laws that restrict the ability of local and international NGOs to receive and use foreign aid within their sovereign territory. This trend has gained momentum recently and attracted considerable attention from researchers and policymakers (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Christensen & Weinstein, 2013; Dupuy et al., 2015; Rutzen, 2015).

Today, the concept of civil society takes a more neutral stance, considering the differences in its implementation in developed and developing countries. Despite increasing criticism of the traditional paradigm that viewed civil society as the engine of democracy, new evidence has emerged that civil society can coexist and thrive even under authoritarian governance. Some researchers have called this post-transitory period a period of backlash (Kendra et al., 2016, p.5), dominated by trends of tighter control and even repression of NGOs in non-democratic and



sometimes even democratic countries, declining funding for NGOs around the world, and a decrease in their numbers.

The historical development of the concept has brought us to a period when civil society is going through difficult times, especially in non-democratic, authoritarian countries, including Belarus. Therefore, exploring the available concepts on how civil society exists in non-democratic regimes and how these regimes act is essential.

## **1.2. The civil society-authoritarian state relationship**

To begin with, some researchers who adhere to the approach that civil society is one of the pillars of democracy generally question the existence of civil society in non-democratic regimes (Baker, 1999). However, many contemporary studies show that it can also exist in authoritarian regimes but in a slightly different form, given the conditions (Heidemann, 2007).

The bulk of research related to civil society has focused on empirical studies conducted in the context of liberal democratic regimes (Stigum et al., 2017, p. 8). Recently, however, more and more attention has been paid to analysing the practices of state-civil society interaction in authoritarian regimes. This topic is becoming a centre of interest for researchers conducting studies in regions of Asia (Hildebrandt, 2013; Teets, 2013), the Middle East (Aarts & Cavatorta, 2013), North Africa (Chomiak & Entelis, 2013; Liverani, 2008), and sub-Saharan Africa (Helliker, 2012; LeVan, 2011).

Civil society's independence from the state is regarded as a crucial characteristic in Western societies (Keane, 1988). In contrast, in authoritarian states, civil society is viewed differently, and its function may not necessarily be separate from the state (Kienle, 2011). Despite the complexity and diversity of state-civil society relations and interactions in non-democratic settings, there is a lack of a unifying theory to explain these relationships (Nyers, 2017). Previous research has attempted to categorise organisations operating under authoritarian regimes into three types of CSOs: claimant non-governmental organisations, loyal non-governmental organisations, and service non-profit organisations (Tarrow, 1994). Claimant non-governmental organisations, such as human rights and environmental advocacy groups, are politically active and often subject to repression when there is limited space for their activities. Loyal non-governmental organisations are often policy-oriented and supportive of the state, and their activities may include opposition to human rights movements. Service non-profit organisations are primarily engaged in providing various services and are mostly apolitical. Claimant non-governmental organisations act as advocates for values through information campaigns and participation in socio-cultural change

(Chandhoke, 2001). They primarily promote liberal Western values and human rights-based programs (Tarrow, 1994).

Al-Sayyid (2013) categorises civil society in authoritarian states into “controlled civil society” and “separate civil society”, where the latter actively promotes human rights, civil, and political liberties. Organisations belonging to “separate civil society” are often subject to repression because their activities represent a counter-discourse that may threaten the regime's legitimacy (Kienle, 2011). Due to the high likelihood of repression, these organisations often lack significant mobilisation capacity and are on the periphery.

### **1.2.1. Shrinking space and repression**

Authoritarian regimes have the capability to exert control over civil society, and numerous methods have been identified by researchers that allow governments to control and suppress NGOs (Heurlin, 2010; Wiktorowicz, 2000). Countries use a variety of tactics such as laws, bureaucratic and fiscal harassment, smear campaigns in the media, intelligence services, and direct repression. These methods aim to limit the scope of civil society's activities and suppress any oppositional or dissenting voices. Numerous laws have been implemented to restrict civil society actors from criticising the government, resulting in a narrowed operating space. The state's control over the internet has been strengthened with the help of media laws. The anti-terrorism laws, numbering more than 140 in the world, are not just aimed at terrorists but also at those who express critical and democratic opposition, as well as civil society accused of terrorism. When national activists are isolated from external funding and digital connections, and intelligence agencies subject them to surveillance, it not only shrinks the space for NGOs but can also lead to their complete closure, according to German researcher Unmüßig B (2016). In some cases, the state may even create non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) that operate under its control to increase its legitimacy both domestically and internationally (Heurlin, 2010).

The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) reports that since 2012 more than 100 laws have been passed or proposed in different regions that impose restrictions on the registration, foreign funding, and freedom of assembly of such organisations (ICNL, 2018). These laws not only target democratic and human rights organisations but also humanitarian and development-oriented NGOs. The impact of these restrictions is evident in the difficulty that civil society organisations face in establishing and registering their operations, followed by restrictions on freedom of association and funding. Countries such as China and Russia are among the most vocal proponents of suppressing civil society, but similar trends are observable in countries close

to Western Europe, such as Turkey and Hungary, as well as in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In the period between 2012 and 2018, 72 countries considered or adopted new restrictions on civil society organisations (ICNL, 2018). The growing trend of legal restrictions on civil society organisations poses a significant threat to the right to association and free speech, which are fundamental to the functioning of democratic societies (Smith, 2019).

While their motives differ, all authoritarian regimes share a common goal - to maintain political power and to secure the economic interests of the majority of the elite. The elite believes that any organised activity and protests should be suppressed initially. The reasons for restricting freedom of action are many and interrelated. For example, the progress of Western democracy, in general, has lost its legitimacy, and monetary transfers from industrialised countries for democratisation processes are perceived much more critically today than in the 1990s, especially when such funding benefits not only state and non-state recipients.

### **1.2.2. Transnational repression**

Autocratic regimes not only exert their control over civil society within their own borders but also try to extend their influence beyond their boundaries. This can manifest in various forms, such as sponsoring violence against exiled dissidents, extraditing political emigrants, deploying spyware to monitor digital activities, or even forcibly disappearing expatriates. The increasing flow of global migration has given rise to what is known as “transnational authoritarianism”, where autocracies attempt to maximise the material benefits of their outbound citizens while also controlling their political voice abroad to minimise risks.

Transnational repression, as defined by Freedom House, refer to the practice of suppressing dissent in diasporas and exile through cross-border means such as assassinations, illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, Interpol abuses, and intimidation of relatives<sup>1</sup>. This is a serious violation of human rights and affects civilians everywhere, even in democracies like the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Australia, and South Africa, and others.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), transnational state repression, can take the following forms:

- Persecution;
- Stalking;
- Hacking;

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House. *Transnational Repression*. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>

- Attacks;
- Attempted kidnapping;
- Forcing or coercing the victim to return to their home country;
- Threatening or detaining family members in the home country;
- Freezing of financial assets;
- Disinformation campaigns on the Internet.<sup>2</sup>

All these transnational repressive methods that are currently being employed by authoritarian regimes target not only political opponents of the authorities but also civil society in the form of particular active citizens, initiatives, or organisations.

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<sup>2</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). *Transnational Repression*. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/transnational-repression>

## CHAPTER 2. THE CASE STUDY

Our research paper focuses on Belarus, an authoritarian state that is experiencing a decline in various international indicators following the 2020 presidential election characterised by massive fraud and subsequent protests violently suppressed by the authorities. The country is on its way to an even more unfree political regime and this dynamic has implications for the overall political, economic and social context. However, our research focuses primarily on analysing civil society and its response to the rapidly deteriorating and shrinking environment in the country.

To conduct the research, we have chosen the case study methodology and analysed existing studies, reports, surveys, analytical articles, and expert opinions about civil society in Belarus in detail.

First, a quick overview of the country will be given, followed by a short description of what civil society in Belarus is and how we operationalise this notion in this study. Next, the relationship between the state and civil society will be briefly discussed from a historical perspective. After that, we will focus on the watershed years (2020-2023) to find answers to our main question about civil society's reaction to state repression. We will turn our attention not only to the reactions but also to identify the needs and challenges faced by Belarusian civil society during this period when the space for the third sector was actively shrinking, and state repression was applied in a wide range. In addition, in the process of the research it became clear that for a more complete understanding of the topic it is also necessary to consider the emerging trends and tendencies in civil society in this period.

### 2.1. Country Context Overview

In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the present study, it is imperative to delineate the contextual background of research country. Belarus is a presidential republic, with the incumbent president having been in power for six consecutive terms since 1994. As of 2021, the country has a population of approximately 9.34 million people<sup>3</sup>, and a yearly GDP per capita of approximately 68.207 USD as of 2021<sup>4</sup>. The average country economic growth rate for 2016-2021 (1% per year) was feeble compared to previous periods, especially compared to the country's economic potential (an average annual growth rate of 5-7% is a desirable benchmark). Growth

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<sup>3</sup> National statistical committee of The Republic of Belarus. (2021). *Population rate*. Retrieved from <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/Indicators/Preview?key=144299>

<sup>4</sup> International Monetary Found. (2021). *World Economic Outlook Database*. Retrieved from <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/October/weo-report?c=913,&s=NGDPD,PPPGDP,NGDPDPC,PPPPC,&sy=2020&ey=2028&ssm=0&scsm=1&sc=0&ssd=1&ssc=0&sic=0&sort=country&ds=.&br=1>

during this period was among the weakest in Central and Eastern Europe, and the income gap with neighboring countries continues to widen<sup>5</sup>.

At the same time Belarus has a high level of scientific and technological development. In the Global Innovation Index, Belarus ranks 38th out of 132 countries in the sub-index of “human capital and research”. However, the country's expenditures on research and development as a percentage of GDP were only 0.55% in 2020<sup>6</sup>.

It seems challenging to look at the actual level of unemployment in the country, as the official statistics used by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (BELSTAT) is calculated as the ratio of the number of unemployed registered with the labor, employment and social protection bodies to the number of economically active population. Nevertheless, in Belarus, a few people register as unemployed, as it makes no sense for people to do so; the unemployment benefit is around 10\$ per month<sup>7</sup>. For comparison, in Belarus in 2021, the official unemployment rate did not exceed 0.2%, while the ILO methodology calculated unemployment rate was 3.7%. Thus, comparing the data on the number of unemployed people obtained by both methods shows an excess of more than 25 times. Therefore, estimating the scale of unemployment in Belarus is somewhat tricky<sup>8</sup>.

The Belarusian government also reports annually on the country's low poverty level. However, independent studies of poverty show significantly higher values of poverty in the country. Thus, according to official statistics, from 2009 to 2019, the absolute poverty rate, calculated by BELSTAT (by the share of the population with incomes below the subsistence minimum), varied between 5-7% of the population of Belarus. At the same time, the absolute poverty level, calculated according to the World Bank methodology (by the cost of basic needs), reached 31% of the country's population<sup>9</sup>.

Belarus has been consistently labeled as an authoritarian country by the international community. This characterisation has been substantiated by various indices. For instance, Freedom

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<sup>5</sup> Крук, Д. (2022). *Экономический обзор*. BEROC. Retrieved from <https://www.beroc.org/upload/iblock/92f/92fb1dfd4c825b858a6453a6604e3109.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Global Innovation Index. (2021). *Tracking Innovation through the COVID-19 Crisis*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalinnovationindex.org/userfiles/file/reportpdf/gii-full-report-2021.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Мазоль, О. (2022). *Реализация социальной политики в новой Беларуси: от перераспределительной модели к модели ускоренного развития человеческого капитала*. BEROC Policy Paper Series. PP no.109. Retrieved from <https://beroc.org/upload/medialibrary/a08/a085581ec9a62ac849bd5ab0bd08bd50.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Манцурова, Н. В. (2022). *Факторы повышения эффективности системы социальной защиты от безработицы*. Социологический альманах (13). Retrieved from <https://socio.bas-net.by/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Sotsiologicheskij-almanah- vypusk-13.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Мазоль, О. (2020) *Оценка бедности в Беларуси за 2019 год*. BEROC Policy Paper Series, PP No. 95. Retrieved from <https://beroc.org/upload/iblock/349/349be58f423bc731c7b3581cb3fe56a8.pdf>

House, which conducts annual research and compiles ratings on the state of political and civil liberties in countries around the world, has categorised Belarus as a consolidated authoritarian state where elections are blatantly rigged, and civil liberties are significantly curtailed. The global Index of Democracy for Belarus is 2 out of 100 (see Figure 1), while the Index of Freedom is 8 out of 100<sup>10</sup> (see Figure 2).

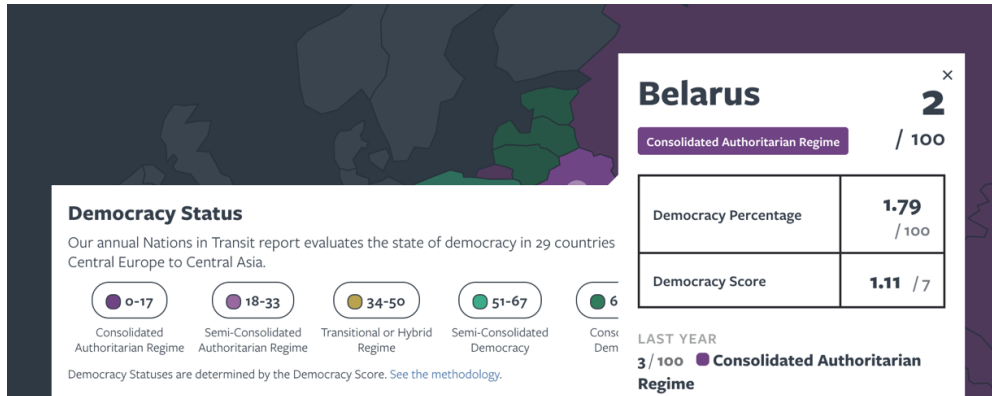


Figure 1. Freedom in the World Index, Democracy Status (Belarus, 2023)

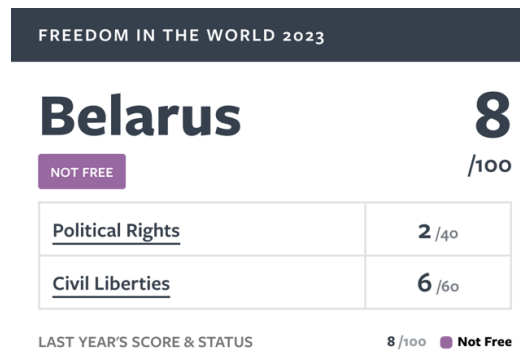


Figure 2. Freedom in the World Index (Belarus, 2023)

Based on the 2022 Index of Democracy rankings by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the Republic of Belarus witnessed a significant decline in its ratings, dropping by seven points to occupy the 153rd position out of 167 countries<sup>11</sup>. This decline has also placed Belarus among the top ten countries globally that recorded the highest drop in rating indicators (see Figure 3).

<sup>10</sup> Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom House Map: Belarus*. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=nit&year=2023>

<sup>11</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). (2022). *Top 10 Improvements and Declines in the Index*. Retrieved from <https://www.eiu.com/n/content/the-eiu-update/>



Figure 3. Index of Democracy rankings by EIU, 2022. Worst performers

From the figure (4) below, it can be seen that according to the Democracy Index, the country is graded 1.99 out of 10.

Democracy Index 2022								
	Overall score	Rank	Change in rank from previous year	I Electoral process and pluralism	II Functioning of government	III Political participation	IV Political culture	V Civil liberties
Russia	2.28	146	-22	0.92	2.14	2.22	3.75	2.35
Venezuela	2.23	147	4	0.00	1.07	5.56	1.88	2.65
Burundi	2.13	148	1	0.00	0.00	3.89	5.00	1.76
Uzbekistan	2.12	149	1	0.08	1.86	2.78	5.00	0.88
Saudi Arabia	2.08	150	2	0.00	3.57	2.22	3.13	1.47
Libya	2.06	151	3	0.00	0.00	3.89	3.75	2.65
Eritrea	2.03	152	1	0.00	2.14	0.56	6.88	0.59
Belarus	1.99	153	-7	0.00	0.79	3.33	4.38	1.47
Iran	1.96	154	0	0.00	2.50	3.33	2.50	1.47
Yemen	1.95	155	-1	0.00	0.00	3.89	5.00	0.88
China	1.94	156=	-8	0.00	3.21	2.78	3.13	0.59
Tajikistan	1.94	156=	1	0.00	2.21	2.22	4.38	0.88

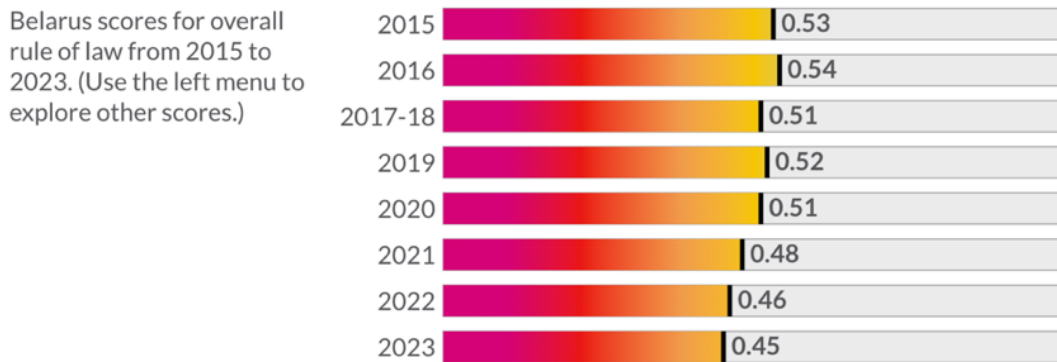
Figure 4. Democracy Index 2022

In the global Rule of Law Index for 2023, Belarus lost three positions in the ranking, dropping to 104th place out of 142. At the same time, back in 2015, Belarus was on the 50th line, and in 2020 - on 68th<sup>12</sup> (see Figure 5).

<sup>12</sup> World Justice Project. (2023). *Rule of Law Index 2023: Belarus*. Retrieved from <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2023/Belarus/>



## Belarus Overall Rule of Law Score Over Time, 2015 - 2023



*Figure 5. Belarus Overall Rule of Law Score (2015-2023)*

The Human Freedom Index, a global study and accompanying ranking that assesses the level of human freedom in countries around the world, also notes negative trends for Belarus, which lost nine positions for 2019-2020 and is ranked 126th out of 165 (see Figure 6).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cato Institute. (2020). *Human Freedom Index 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.cato.org/human-freedom-index/2020>

Rank	Freedom rank change (2019–2020)	Country/Territory	Personal freedom	Economic freedom	Human freedom	Freedom score change (2019–2020)
87	▼ 4	Kyrgyz Republic	6.51	6.97	6.70	▼ 0.32
87	▲ 3	Senegal	7.16	6.05	6.70	▼ 0.20
89	▲ 9	Ukraine	7.09	6.11	6.68	▼ 0.09
90	▼ 4	Honduras	6.40	7.04	6.67	▼ 0.31
91	▼ 3	Colombia	6.72	6.55	6.65	▼ 0.30
91	▼ 17	El Salvador	6.31	7.12	6.65	▼ 0.69
93	0	Burkina Faso	6.98	6.15	6.63	▼ 0.20
94	▲ 11	Gabon	7.27	5.72	6.62	▼ 0.04
94	▲ 13	Liberia	6.70	6.51	6.62	▲ 0.02
94	▲ 4	Mozambique	6.87	6.27	6.62	▼ 0.15
97	▼ 3	Gambia, The	6.17	7.23	6.61	▼ 0.21
98	▼ 7	Bolivia	6.92	6.15	6.60	▼ 0.28
98	▼ 3	Mexico	6.23	7.12	6.60	▼ 0.20
100	▲ 9	Kenya	6.31	6.96	6.58	▲ 0.01
101	▼ 5	Guinea-Bissau	7.18	5.64	6.54	▼ 0.24
102	▲ 8	Sierra Leone	6.92	5.98	6.53	▲ 0.06
103	▼ 1	Philippines	6.11	7.09	6.52	▲ 0.17
104	▼ 4	Thailand	6.28	6.78	6.49	▼ 0.26
105	▼ 9	Côte d'Ivoire	6.79	6.01	6.47	▼ 0.31
105	▼ 13	Madagascar	6.74	6.10	6.47	▼ 0.39
107	▼ 1	Kazakhstan	5.82	7.35	6.46	▼ 0.17
108	▼ 7	Jordan	5.69	7.37	6.39	▼ 0.32
109	▼ 2	Zambia	6.25	6.56	6.38	▼ 0.22
110	▲ 12	Niger	6.59	5.97	6.33	▲ 0.19
110	0	Sri Lanka	6.05	6.72	6.33	▼ 0.14
112	▲ 1	India	6.00	6.72	6.30	▼ 0.12
113	▲ 5	Kuwait	5.92	6.73	6.25	▲ 0.05
113	▲ 3	Togo	6.29	6.19	6.25	▼ 0.03
113	▲ 1	Tunisia	6.36	6.09	6.25	▼ 0.05
116	▼ 4	Cambodia	5.60	7.13	6.24	▼ 0.19
116	▼ 1	Tanzania	6.01	6.55	6.24	▼ 0.05
118	▲ 3	Uganda	5.38	7.18	6.13	▼ 0.04
119	0	Mali	6.12	5.85	6.01	▼ 0.18
119	▲ 5	Russian Federation	5.58	6.62	6.01	▼ 0.10
121	▼ 17	Lebanon	6.37	5.45	5.98	▼ 0.69
122	▲ 5	Angola	6.02	5.91	5.97	▲ 0.01
123	0	Nicaragua	5.33	6.84	5.96	▼ 0.17
124	▲ 1	Nigeria	5.38	6.70	5.93	▼ 0.17
124	▼ 5	Rwanda	5.24	6.90	5.93	▼ 0.26
126	▼ 9	<b>Belarus</b>	5.03	6.83	5.78	▼ 0.49
127	▲ 4	United Arab Emirates	4.63	7.35	5.76	▼ 0.13
128	▲ 2	Comoros	5.34	6.31	5.75	▼ 0.16
129	▼ 2	Qatar	4.82	6.99	5.73	▼ 0.23
130	▲ 10	Turkey	5.15	6.48	5.71	▲ 0.08

Figure 6. The Human Freedom Index 2019-2020

In 2021, Belarus rapidly broke into the ranking of countries by transnational repression, compiled by Freedom House. From the figure (7) below, Minsk accounts for 31% of all transnational repressions recorded in 2021. Also, according to the report, the Belarusian authorities used physical violence against people abroad 29 times this year<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Freedom House (2022). *Transnational Repression Report 2022*. Retrieved from [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Complete\\_TransnationalRepressionReport2022\\_NEW\\_0.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Complete_TransnationalRepressionReport2022_NEW_0.pdf)

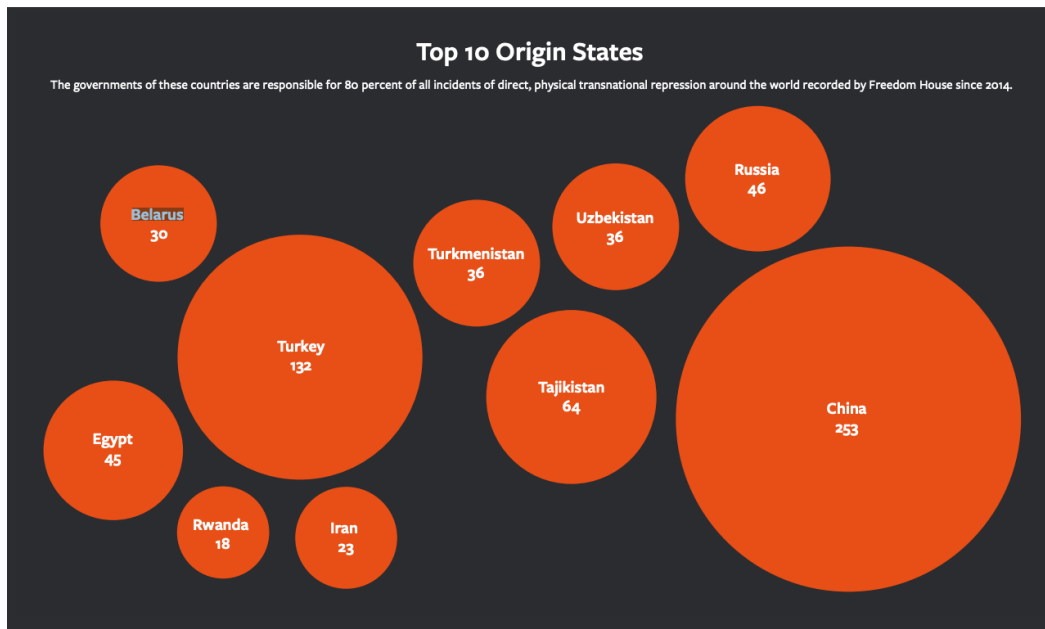


Figure 7. Top 10 Origin States responsible for 80% of all transnational repression since 2014

As of April 28, 2023, there are 1,500 political prisoners in the country. It is worth noting that only two of them were recognised as such before the start of the 2020 election campaign.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2. Civil society in Belarus

Before 2020, civil society in Belarus was mainly considered as a set of associations that could be institutionalised or not, and could have official registration or not. However, since some organisations could not be legalised, estimating the number of organisations in Belarus was always difficult.

According to official data as of 1 January 2021, before the mass liquidation of NGOs began, there were 3,021 registered public associations, 25 trade unions and about 400 charitable organisations in Belarus (Khrapko, 2021). Nevertheless, many NPOs were registered, for example, in the form of institutions, which is not included in the official statistics of civil society organisations, and there are no statistical data on them (Fomina et al., 2021).

Before 2021, since official statistics do not take into account all data, independent researchers assume that the number of civil society organisations and associations in Belarus was 3,000-4,000 (Lawtrend, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Centre “Viasna”. (2023). *Political Prisoners in Belarus*. Retrieved from <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

At the same time, according to the CSO Meter prepared by the European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL), as of 2020, Belarus had the lowest number of NPOs per number of inhabitants among the Eastern Partnership countries. Only 3.5 organisations per 10 000 inhabitants. According to this indicator, Belarus is behind Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova and Georgia. For example, in Ukraine this indicator is 4.5 times higher, and in Moldova - 12.5 times.

Based on official data, the spheres of activity of civil society organisations in Belarus are also quite tricky to define in precise figures, both for the reasons described above and due to the specific grouping applied by the Belarusian Ministry of Justice. According to official data, as of 2017, the following types of public associations were registered in Belarus:

- physical culture and sports;
- charitable;
- youth (including children's organisations);
- educational, cultural, leisure and educational organisations;
- citizens belonging to national minorities;
- war and labour invalids, veterans;
- scientific and technical;
- supporters of nature protection, historical and cultural monuments;
- creative;
- women's organisations.

The study conducted in 2014<sup>16</sup> by the Centre for European Transformation and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies revealed that the majority of **active** civil society organizations in Belarus focused on cultural and social issues (17.8% and 17.1% respectively), followed by human rights issues (16.4%). About 9.1% of organizations focused on supporting and developing civil society in general. The remaining organizations were divided among various thematic areas such as ecology, local development, business representation (7% to 9%), education (3.5%), and analytics and research (1.7%)<sup>17</sup> (see Figure 8).

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<sup>16</sup> We assume that this sectoral breakdown for active CSOs has not changed significantly since the study. However, we also draw attention to the fact that this study concerns independent autonomous CSOs and was not intended to analyse, for example, service organisations working with vulnerable groups, as such organisations are almost all not entirely independent from the state. Also, of course, non-organised forms of activity, such as initiatives, have not been taken into account.

<sup>17</sup> Водолажская Т., Шелест О., Егоров А., и Артёменко Е. (2014). *Исследование потенциала солидарности в белорусском организованном гражданском обществе*. Центр европейской трансформации, Белорусский институт стратегических исследований. Retrieved from [https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014\\_Solidarity\\_NGOs\\_Belarus.pdf](https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014_Solidarity_NGOs_Belarus.pdf)



Figure 8. Profile of active civil society organisations in Belarus by sphere of operation, 2014, %

Looking at the working conditions of organisations in Belarus, consider the CSO Meter data. CSO Meter is a tool that aims to facilitate regular and consistent monitoring and evaluation of the operating environment for civil society organisations in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. It includes standards and indicators in 10 different areas that gauge legislation and practice. The tool is developed based on a review of international standards and best regulatory practices. The figure (9) below shows that in 2020 Belarus has also declined in CSO Meter's overall country score - 2.2 out of 7.<sup>18</sup>



The scores range from 1 to 7, where 1 signifies the lowest possible score (extremely unfavourable – authoritarian - environment) and 7 signifies the highest possible score (extremely favourable environment).

Areas	Overall	Legislation	Practice
Freedom of Association	2.3 ↓	2.8 ↓	1.8 ↓
Equal Treatment	2.7 ↓	3.1 ↓	2.2 ↓
Access to Funding	2.2 ↓	2.4 ↓	2.0
Freedom of Peaceful Assembly	1.6	1.9	1.2
Right to Participation in Decision-Making	2.7	3.1 ↓	2.2

Figure 9. CSO Meter 2020, Belarus

<sup>18</sup> CSOmeter. (2020). *Country Profile: Belarus*. 2020. Retrieved from <https://csometer.info/countries/belarus>

Other international indexes related to civil society are also indicative. Thus, one of the tools for assessing the level of civil society development is the CSO Sustainability Index, calculated for more than sixty countries. Looking at this Index and its dynamics, it should be noted that over the 18 years of observation (from 2005 to 2022) the Index fluctuated between 5.3 and 6.0 points for Belarus. Country' performance has only been deteriorating, with the sharpest decline occurring in 2020. It is particularly noteworthy that since 2021, Belarus has received the lowest score, 7, for the legal environment. Some lawyers say that since mid-2020, the country has been in legal default<sup>19</sup>. Thus, Belarus belongs to the countries with weak CSO's sustainability (see Figure 10)<sup>20</sup>.

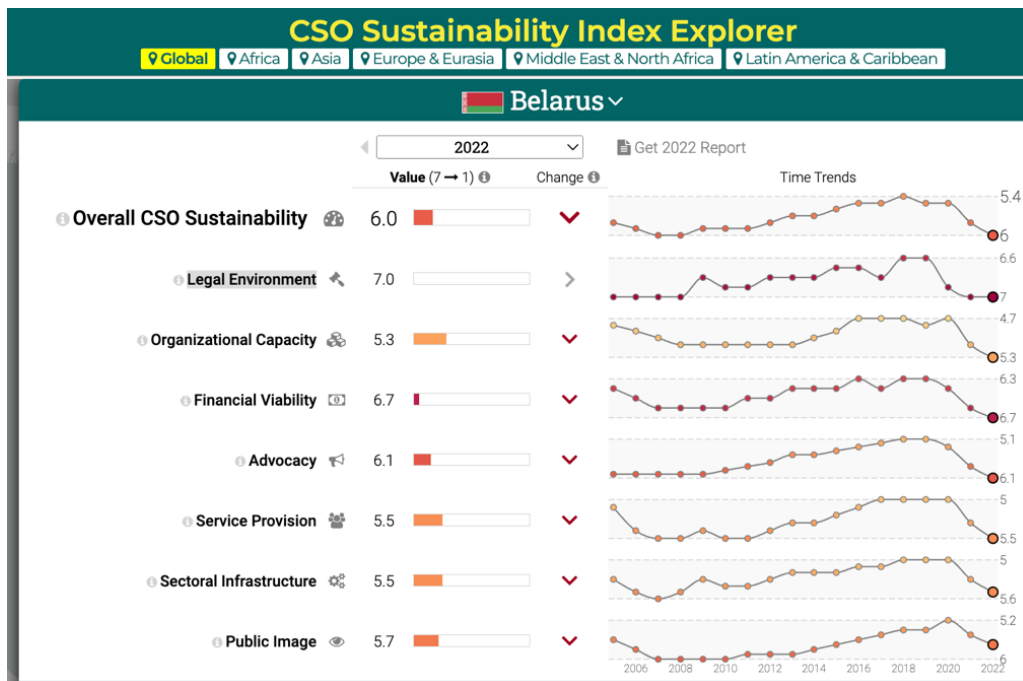


Figure 10. CSO Sustainability Index Explorer, Belarus, 2022

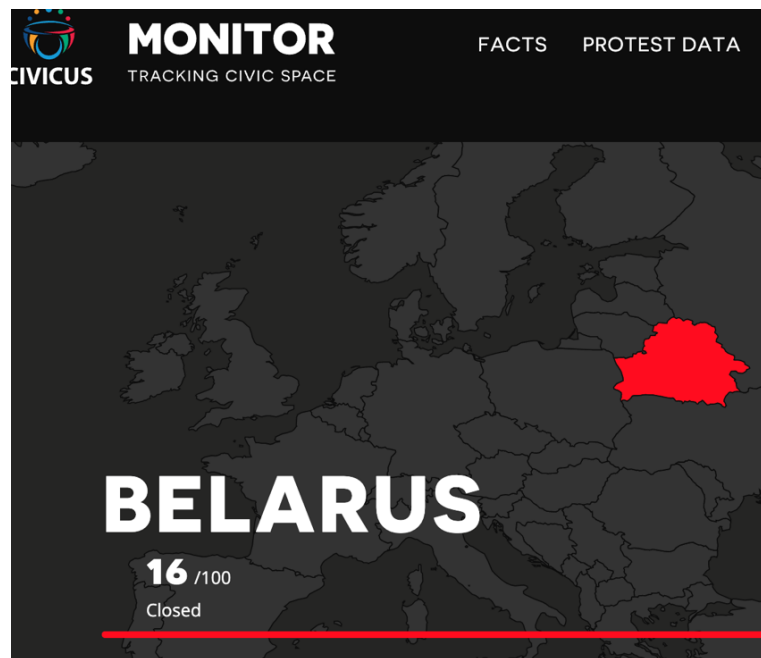
According to a report by CIVICUS Monitor (2021)<sup>21</sup>, a global research organisation that evaluates fundamental freedoms across 197 countries and territories, Belarus has been downgraded from a “repressed” to a “closed” country in 2021 (see Figure 11). The rating of “closed” is considered the worst, indicating a climate of fear and violence where people are frequently

<sup>19</sup> Шалай, Е. “Правовой дефолт” против “спортивного интереса”. Как в Беларуси преследуют адвокатов и почему они все равно защищают протестующих. Current Time. Retrieved from <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-advocates/30880595.html>

<sup>20</sup> CSO Sustainability Index Explorer. Country Profile: Belarus. 2005-2022. Retrieved from <https://csosi.org/>

<sup>21</sup> CIVICUS Monitor (2021). Belarus Country Ratings. Retrieved from <https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/country-ratings/belarus.html>

imprisoned and assaulted for exercising their civil rights to association, freedom of assembly, and expression.



*Figure 11. CIVICUS Monitor, Belarus, 2023*

During the COVID-19 epidemic, there was a significant increase in self-organisation and the rapid development of horizontal ties between people while the state effectively withdrew itself from the problem. Some experts characterise this period as the time of the most profound crisis of people's trust in the state, perhaps in the entire sovereign history of the country. People began to self-organise for mutual aid, leading to a substantial and widespread increase in civic engagement and rallying of people in the face of a common problem. This time can be seen as a period of the beginning of the formation of a “new” civil society in the country. At the same time, the COVID-19 epidemic also hit hard the “old” CSOs, which were forced to revise their activities significantly and adapt plans and methods of work during this period (CSO METER, 2020). This new state of mass civic engagement and changes in the usual functioning of “old” civil society organisations became a characteristic feature of the country in 2020.

### **2.2.1. Operationalisation of civil society concept in Belarus**

In this study, it seems necessary to operationalise the concept of civil society. Due to the diversity and heterogeneity of civil society itself after 2020 in Belarus, specific problems have arisen in its conceptualisation and operationalisation. We propose the following categorisation to consider this

concept in the context of this paper. We distinguish two main categories – “old” and “new” civil society. The “old” civil society (old CSOs) is understood as (un)institutionalised, (un)registered civil organisations that existed in the country before 2020.

On the other hand, the “new” civil society includes a wide range of voluntary associations of citizens, both institutionalised and informal, established after 2020, including diaspora associations active in various countries. It is important to note that part of the “new” civil society after 2020 has turned into pro-political structures, including opposition and democratically-minded organisations and initiatives that have gradually attracted some representatives of the “old” opposition and civil society to their side. These structures have become full-fledged political players and are excluded from this study because they fall outside its scope. In addition, the study does not include the pro-militarist offshoots of the “new” civil society that emerged in 2022 after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

We will also use the notion of “third sector” to refer to a set of actors from both “old” and “new” civil society.

We also deliberately refrain from introducing an additional categorisation of the thematic sector of CSOs because, firstly, creating such a detailed categorisation would require more work than we can cover in this thesis. Secondly, specifically in our main question about CSOs' reactions to repression, this categorisation is redundant, as general trends indicate that the authorities repress organisations without any thematic reference, whether organisations dealing with ecology or curling enthusiasts. The authorities pay slightly less attention to service organisations that work with vulnerable groups and charitable organisations. However, these organisations in Belarus can hardly be called independent, as they are rather closely connected with various state structures, such as hospices or centres for territorial social development. Thus, we allow this kind of generalisation in this paper.

Within the chosen operationalised concepts, the research aims to analyse the dynamics of the development and existence of these forms of civil society, focusing on specific trends and tendencies that have emerged in response to the political and social challenges of recent years, including civil society responses to repressive measures applied by the state.

### **2.3. A brief historical overview of the dynamics of interaction between civil society and the authority in Belarus**

Belarus gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and since then, the country has undergone significant political and social changes. The non-profit sector in the country also began



to develop actively. Nevertheless, already since 1996, there has been an increasing level of pressure from the authorities on NGOs in Belarus. The authorities have used various methods to suppress the activities of these organisations. One of the primary methods used by the authorities in Belarus to pressure NPOs has been their re-registration.

The first re-registration of public associations was carried out in late 1994 and early 1995 after the adoption of the Law on Public Associations and the Law on Political Parties. The number of public associations that had to re-register in 1994 was 787 organisations. Only about 62% of the organisations passed the first re-registration<sup>22</sup>.

The second re-registration of public associations took place in 1999, on the threshold of two significant electoral campaigns: parliamentary elections in 2000 and presidential elections in 2001. Following this re-registration, slightly over half of the 2,502 existing associations in Belarus remained (Smolianko & Chausov, 2016).

The trend of re-registration and liquidation of organisations before or after critical political events characterises almost the entire period of relations between the state and civil society until 2020.

In addition, in 1999, the Belarusian legislation included a ban on the activities of unregistered associations. Between 2005 and 2019, violation of this prohibition could lead to criminal liability. This ban was used to suppress the activities of unregistered organisations that, in the opinion of the authorities, posed a threat to national security<sup>23</sup>.

The pressure of the authorities on non-profit organisations in Belarus significantly impacted the development of the entire civil society in the country. Many CSOs were already forced to stop their activities, and those that remained faced severe restrictions on their work. Despite these difficulties, some organisations managed to survive and continue their work, albeit under challenging conditions.

Since 2001, Belarusian legislation also sets significant restrictions for NGOs to receive funding from both domestic and foreign sources. Foreign aid is subject to mandatory preliminary registration with the Department for Humanitarian Activities of the Presidential Affairs Directorate of the Republic of Belarus or the Ministry of Economy before its use. In practice, foreign aid

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<sup>22</sup> Камунікат (2004). *Право на аб'ядненне Беларусь 1994–2004*. Minsk. Retrieved from [http://kamunikat.org/usie\\_knihi.html?pubid=21252](http://kamunikat.org/usie_knihi.html?pubid=21252)

<sup>23</sup> See 16.

registration is selective and unavailable to all organisations. Since 2011 criminal liability for violating the procedure for receiving and using foreign aid was introduced.<sup>24</sup>

In 2003, several well-known public associations were liquidated, adding to the existing tendencies to restrict the activities of NCOs in Belarus. By the beginning of 2004, only a little over 2,200 organisations remained in the country, approaching a ratio of one organisation per 4,500 people (Smolianko & Chausov, 2016).

In 2004, judicial bodies decided to liquidate 15 republican and international and 23 local public associations. In addition, 69 public associations decided to liquidate themselves.

Subsequently, in 2005, another 68 public associations were liquidated (Smolianko & Chausov, 2016). It is obvious that new repressive measures on the part of the authorities against NCOs and the introduction of additional restrictions for their activities were mainly due to the desire to prevent the strengthening of those public structures that could in the future have a real influence on electoral processes. A new stage of political development began in the country, associated with the strengthening of the authoritarian regime in a stable form.

In the second half of 2005 and early 2006, after the introduction of the presidential decree “On Some Measures to Streamline the Activities of Foundations”, which required the harmonisation of foundation statutes with the new requirements, the actual re-registration of all Belarusian foundations took place. Until July 2005, foundations were the most convenient organisational and legal form for NPOs. However, changes in the legislation led to severe changes in the structure and functioning of the country's non-profit sector. Further coexistence of the “parallel society” and the authoritarian regime became impossible, as the regime needed to eliminate a potential source of destabilisation in the process of strengthening its personal dictatorship. This period saw the most significant changes in the norms of interaction between the authorities and NGOs, and in general, the state began to actively act as a force openly opposing the NPO sector (Arlouski, 2021).

Some civil society researchers in Belarus agree that the regime never attached importance to civil society and perceived it as redundant. It had to “tolerate” the existence of such organisations only during “warming” diplomatic relations with the West<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Егоров А., Шутов А., и Кацук Н. (2017). *Гражданское общество Беларуси: актуальное состояние и условия развития. Аналитический обзор*. ЦЭТ. Retrieved from [https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2017\\_Civil-Society-Belarus-RU.pdf](https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2017_Civil-Society-Belarus-RU.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Lawtrend. (2021). *Конституционные основы и дополнительные ограничения*. Retrieved from <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-ofassociation/pravovoe-regulirovanie-nko/konstitutsionnyeosnovy-i-dopolnitelnye-ogranicheniya>

Further, the text will be organised by year, from 2020 to October 2023, and will include a description of the external context during this period, which has had and continues to impact both the state and the third sector. This context will be complemented by a description of the state's strategy, which includes the use of repression against civil society in the country and a description of civil society's response to what is happening.

## 2.4. Watershed years

### *2020: Authorities vs. active citizens*

In 2020, the activity of citizens not only remained unabated compared to the COVID-19 period but intensified even more during the election campaign period against the background of the upcoming presidential elections. At this time, initiative groups to nominate presidential candidates began to form. People collected signatures, organised pickets and used other forms of expressing their position. Full of hope for change, people approached the voting process more responsibly than ever before on the wave of inspiring civic upsurge. Lines of voters lined up at polling stations<sup>26</sup>. However, all hopes were shattered by the harsh reality of the authoritarian regime. The election was predictably won by the incumbent president with a blatantly fraudulent result of 81%<sup>27</sup>. Encouraged by the successful collective action during the pandemic, people took to mass peaceful protests against the election results.

Peaceful protests were suppressed by the regime using brutal force. The brutality with which the authorities tried to take control of the situation did not reduce the degree of protests but, on the contrary, heated it up. Gradually, more and more people began to join the protests. Demonstrations became weekly, and various groups of citizens, from students to pensioners, joined the various actions<sup>28,29</sup>. The protests literally covered the whole country. The state, having no other levers than force, continued its rigid systematic suppression of any activity. Thus, people were detained,

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<sup>26</sup> Козенко, А. (2021). *Революция несбывшихся надежд. Как Беларусь за год прошла путь от массовых демонстраций к репрессиям*. BBC. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-58016427>

<sup>27</sup> BBC. (2020). *ЦИК Беларуси: Лукашенко набирает больше 80% голосов*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53715973>

<sup>28</sup> Жуков, Е. (2020). *На "Марш мудрости" в Минске вышли сотни пенсионеров*. DW. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/ru/sotni-pensionerov-vyshli-v-minske-na-marsh-mudrosti/a-55701779>

<sup>29</sup> Radio Svoboda. (2020). *В Минске прошли марш женщин и марш студентов*. Retrieved from <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30898381.html>

beaten, arrested, tortured and even killed<sup>30</sup>. The main activity subsided only in November 2020, but the suppression and the launch of state repression only began to gain momentum.

During this period, the line between the political and the public began to blur. Almost any civic activity began to be perceived by the authorities as political, whether it was a simple tea party in the courtyard or a public lecture on philosophy. Any peaceful gatherings were interpreted as mass riots and gross violations of public order, which entailed detentions, arrests, fines and other administrative penalties<sup>31</sup>. By the end of 2020, receiving criminal penalties under the same articles was already possible<sup>32</sup>.

Significantly, it is worth noting that the main target of state repression this year has been these active participants, who constitute the “new” civil society that united on the wave of political protests. “Old” CSOs can hardly be considered the leading and critical force behind the protests; instead, they were part of this large public outbreak of discontent. Leaders and participants of some “old” CSOs also joined marches and other actions, expressing their support for specific actions and joining forces with “new” activists (CSO METER, 2020).

In response to the brutal suppression of protests and the gradual intensification of repressions, the first big wave of emigration began among “new” civil activists, who were forced to leave the country due to concerns for their lives, fear of persecution and, in many cases, avoiding imprisonment. For this group of new activists, the institutionalisation and formation of sustainable initiatives, communities or organisations began only after the move due to the impossibility of legalising their status in Belarus this year (Chulitskaya & Rabava, 2021).

To summarise, after the eventful year of 2020, Belarus's civil society concept has undergone significant changes. Until 2020, civil society was mostly perceived as institutionally more or less established (non-)legal civil organisations (CSOs). From 2020 onwards, however, a significant transformation took place, which took shape by early 2021. Civil society has conventionally become divided into “old” and “new” civil society. “Old” CSOs can be considered those that were established and functioning before 2020. The activism that began during the COVID-19 pandemic and intensified during the presidential campaign and subsequent protests has resulted in the

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<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International. (2021). *Belarus: 'you are not human beings' - state-sponsored impunity and unprecedented police violence against peaceful protesters*. Retrieved from <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/belarus-you-are-not-human-beings.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Козенко, А. (2021). *Мы не знали друг друга до прошлого лета. Как белорусы объединились с помощью дворовых чатов, и как власть это пресекает*. BBC. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-58149113>

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Center “Viasna”. (2020). *Уголовные дела после акций протеста*. Retrieved from <https://spring96.org/ru/news/99140>

formation of a “new” civil society, or as some researchers call it, “new generation organisations”, “new communities” (Slyunkin, at el., 2021), and even “new proto-communities” (Chulitskaya & Rabava, 2023).

This new civil society is highly diverse. “New” communities included mostly non-institutionalised and illegal civic associations that later formalised and began to function as formalised organisations, initiatives, or remained as grassroots horizontal communities.

The reaction of the “old” civil sector in 2020 was restrained. Some activists were detained and arrested. However, in general, the sector continued to work under repressive conditions, observing elementary security measures, as it was more prepared for such repressive reactions of the state, which had happened before.

The “new” civil society, on the contrary, took the brunt of the violence this year. As we noted at the beginning, it was “new” civil society that became the main target of repression by the regime. Activists and initiatives chose one of several reactions:

- stay in the country, continue to be active, expect not to be detained;
- stay in the country, remain active and be detained;
- cease all activity but be prepared to be detained;
- leave the country, continuing activism in exile<sup>33</sup>.

Many activists and initiatives chose the last option, but people still had other options, they believed that soon everything will change in the country, they just need to wait a little longer.

This year, a one more trend is also beginning to emerge to divide civil society between those who have stayed in the country and those who have gone.

### *2021: Unprecedented pressure on civil society*

2021 can be briefly characterised as a period during which repressions in Belarus intensified and expanded. There was a final disintegration of the development processes of the Belarusian civil society and the strengthened political regime. The entire year of 2021 was marked by the post-election “clean-up” in the state apparatus and state enterprises, but this process reached its peak by the end of the year. Furthermore, while in 2020, the victims were mainly detained protesters and

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<sup>33</sup> Коршунов Г. (2022). *Народный опрос: Горизонтальные связи: что осталось от тех структур самоорганизации, которые возникли в 2020 году*. Центр новых идей. Retrieved from <https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/%D0%93%D0%9E%D0%A0%D0%98%D0%97%D0%9E%D0%9D%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%9B%D0%AC%D0%9D%D0%AB%D0%95-%D0%A1%D0%92%D0%AF%D0%97%D0%98.pdf>

public figures who opposed violence or did not obey the demands of the leadership, in 2021, the authorities seem to have decided to settle scores with all those who did not show sufficient loyalty.

Having conducted an almost complete “clean-up” of the main active communities of the “new” civil society, the regime intensified the level of repression and shifted its focus to institutionalised forms of citizens' association. A main and critical moment in 2021 was the mass forced liquidation of “old” civil society organisations in July, accompanied by extensive searches of organisations' offices, seizure of equipment and documents, arrests of staff and leaders, blocking of accounts, and imposition of fines.

These actions were even pre-announced by authorities. “*We will cut out all the scoundrels you financed. Ah, you (EU - Author's note) are concerned that we have destroyed your structures, NGOs and others,*” said Alexander Lukashenko in November 2021 in an interview with the BBC<sup>34</sup>. In various speeches in recent years, he called NGOs “bandits and foreign agents”,<sup>35</sup> “traitors”, and “harm to the state”, claimed that they “organised the coup and rebellion”, and openly called the total “clean-up” of them<sup>36</sup>. During the same period, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said civil society would “*cease to exist*” if sanctions<sup>37</sup> were tightened. In his opinion: “*It will be, <...> absolutely justified in this situation*”<sup>38</sup>.

By the end of 2021, almost 300 CSOs had been liquidated<sup>39</sup>. The “Lawtrend” survey conducted at the end of 2021 found that more than half of the surveyed organisations (61.9%) reported a decision on their forced liquidation by authorities. In addition, 34% of organisations were searched, and the registration authority inspected 30.9%. Meanwhile, 22.7% of organisations were subjected to inspection by financial authorities, such as tax authorities, the Department of Financial Investigation (DFI) or KGB (The State Security Service). Furthermore, 19.6% received written warnings<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> BBC. (2021). *Интервью А. Лукашенко*. YouTube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99K5xTJNsZk>

<sup>35</sup> BELTA. (2021). *От ядерной безопасности до наращивания экспорта - Лукашенко собрал совещание с руководством Совмина*. Retrieved from <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ot-jadernoj-bezopasnosti-do-naraschivaniya-eksporta-lukashenko-sobral-soveshanie-s-rukovodstvom-451617-2021/>

<sup>36</sup> BELTA. (2022). *Лукашенко о беглых: это бандиты, которые воюют против государства*. BELTA. Retrieved from <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-beglyh-eto-bandity-kotorye-vojujut-protiv-gosudarstva-483353-2022/>

<sup>37</sup> Official Minsk was under intense sanctions pressure during this period.

<sup>38</sup> Романова, Т. (2021). *Разгром третьего сектора в Беларуси: приглашение России*. ISANS. Retrieved from <https://isans.org/articles-ru/razgrom-tretego-sektora-v-belarusi-priglasenie-rossii.html>

<sup>39</sup> Правозащитный Центр “Весна”. (2021). *Ликвидация гражданского общества. Полный список НГО, столкнувшихся с давлением белорусских властей*. Retrieved from <https://spring96.org/ru/news/104540>

<sup>40</sup> Lawtrend. (2022). *Repression against non-profit organisations and civil society activists involved in supporting, promoting, and protecting women's rights and gender equality in Belarus*. Review for August 2020-February 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/repression-against-non-profit-organisations-and->

Apart from the fact that the authorities made a final decision on the total “cleansing” of civil society in 2021, both “old” and “new”, they began to implement several parallel repressive strategies of action against it: internal and external. One strategy dealt with civil society at home, the other with those activists and organisations in exile abroad.

Regarding the internal strategy, as was shown earlier in the historical review, such periods of increased repression and election campaigns in the country have traditionally been accompanied by the adoption of new laws or amendments to existing regulations, further worsening the situation of civil society organisations. After the 2020 presidential elections, the situation repeated itself. However, a characteristic feature of the 2021 period was the legislative consolidation of unprecedented repressive practices that began to be observed in the country.

Thus, among the adopted normative acts in 2021 that had the most significant impact on the activities of civil society organisations are the following:

- Normative acts regulating the implementation of extremist activities;
- Changes in the legislation on foreign donations;
- Changes in the legislation on public reporting of public associations and foundations;
- Changes in the legislation on indirect support of public associations and foundations.

Also, notable changes have been made to some regulations concerning the rights of civil society organisations, such as freedom of assembly, access to court, legal aid, and others (CSO Meter, 2021). Thus, legislation on extremist activity has often been used to prosecute the leadership of civil society organisations, their staff, and volunteers. Extremist activities have repeatedly become the basis for lawsuits and decisions on the forced liquidation of non-profit organisations, as well as the basis for initiating criminal proceedings against civil society activists<sup>41</sup>.

Legal restrictions and liquidations have posed significant challenges to the operation of CSOs in Belarus. The limited channels for accessing funding, which are only available through two state structures - the Ministry of Economy and the Department of Humanitarian Activities - have made it difficult for civil society organisations to obtain funding legally. The loss of formal legal status has further complicated the matter for organisations that have not yet been liquidated, as they are now being denied registration of grants.

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[civil-society-activists-involved-in-supporting-promoting-and-protecting-women-s-rights-and-gender-equality-in-belarus](#)

<sup>41</sup> Центр правовой трансформации, РПОО «Белорусский Хельсинкский Комитет». (2021). *Новое законодательное регулирование в Республике Беларусь как реакция властей на события 2020 года, его соотношение с международными стандартами в сфере прав человека*. Retrieved from [https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe\\_zakonodatelnoe\\_regulirovanie\\_belarus\\_2021\\_2.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe_zakonodatelnoe_regulirovanie_belarus_2021_2.pdf)

Despite the legal prohibition against state interference in the activities of public associations in Belarus, the judicial authorities have checked the documents of these organisations, leading to unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy. Requests for internal documents, contracts with citizens, documents received by e-mail, information about donors, and lists of members of public associations with their personal data have only added to the burden for these CSOs. This increased scrutiny has also resulted in an uptick in administrative detentions and criminal cases, exacerbating the already precarious situation for the third sector in Belarus.

In parallel the regime has also begun implementing a strategy of forming an alternative reality by replacing protesting civil society with a “pocket” civil society in the form of pro-state informal organisations (GONGO)<sup>42</sup>.

Some already existing GONGOs, such as, for instance, BRSM (Belarussian Union of Youths) and the Public Association “Belarusian Union of Women” were granted additional privileges and financial support directly from the state budget<sup>43</sup>. A list of organisations that are loyal to the authorities was created and published.

According to the latest data from the Ministry of Justice for 2021, 36 public associations and 7 foundations appeared in Belarus<sup>44</sup>. In the CSO Meter report (2021), experts, based on the Ministry's data, showed the dynamics, starting from 2010: it turned out that 2021 was the scarcest for new public associations for all these years.

This year, among other things, the state has reached a new transnational level of repression in a second, external repressive strategy targeting those who have emigrated. Law enforcement agencies developed and implemented two chatbots that were supposed to identify activists who have left (Slyunkin, at el., 2021). They were also submitting fabricated requests to Interpol to search for activists (CSO Meter, 2021). Nevertheless, the most egregious case, of course, is the forced landing of an aeroplane in Minsk with an activist on board, flying from Athens to Vilnius<sup>45</sup>.

Speaking about the reactions of civil society, after the mass liquidations of “old” CSOs, searches and arrests began in July 2021, many organisations found themselves in a crisis situation, with their main goal becoming survival and preservation. However, it is worth noting that some organisations remained intact and continued their work. This was particularly true of organisations

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<sup>42</sup> See 31.

<sup>43</sup> Зеркало. (2021). *БРСМ заявил, что хочет взять на себя функции разгромленных НКО. Вспоминаем, откуда взялась эта организация и чем занималась раньше*. Retrieved from <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/10342.html?c>

<sup>44</sup> See 32.

<sup>45</sup> BBC. (2021). *Посадка в Минске: пилоту не дали возможности выбора, утверждает глава Ryanair*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-57488384>



that work with vulnerable groups, which the state often shifts to the third sector (Chulitskaya & Rabava, 2022).

As a result of the pressure from law enforcement agencies and fears for their staff, some organisations stopped their activities. Others temporarily froze their activities due to being unable to continue working in an illegal status, losing their target audience and access to funding. Many CSOs and their staff had to leave the country to maintain their freedom and continue their work, leading to a second mass wave of emigration (Chulitskaya & Rabava, 2021).

All this leads us to a continuation of the trend of territorial division that began in 2020. After 2020, the already diverse composition of civil society continues to divide into groups of those who stayed in the country and those who left. This division now applies not only to the “new” but also to the “old” civil society.

Thus, in addition to the division into “old” and “new” civil society, in 2021, it is possible to distinguish different categories along territorial lines:

- “Old” civil society organisations that have remained in the country and are still active;
- “Old” civil society organisations that have remained in the country but are prevented from operating legally;
- “Old” civil society organisations in a hybrid format, where some of the team stayed in Belarus and some left the country;
- “New” non-institutional communities that are in the country and are active;
- “New” non-institutional communities that have left the country;
- “New” institutional organisations that are outside the country;
- “New” communities in a hybrid format that are (un)institutionalised;
- Diaspora is replenished by activists forced to leave the country.

#### *2022: Total “clean-up” of civil society*

This year, several important events affected the political regime and civil society. One of the key events was the war in Ukraine. With the start of the war, some public organisations switched their activities to helping Ukrainian refugees, holding various solidarity actions and anti-war pickets<sup>46</sup>. New Telegram channel<sup>47</sup> of Belarusian civil society activists tracking the movement of Russian military equipment also appeared.

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<sup>46</sup> Неведомская Т. (2022). *Беларусь - не равно Лукашенко: как белорусы помогают Украине*. DW. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/ru/belarus-ne-ravno-lukashenko-kak-belorusy-pomogajut-ukraine/a-61077718>

<sup>47</sup> Беларускі Гаюн: <https://hajunby.motolko.help/?date=2023-11-18>

In response, the regime intensified repression, this time targeting those who opposed the war. Meanwhile, repression was spreading ever more comprehensively, in particular to entire professional groups and communities with the potential for activism, as the state attempted to expand and seize control of as wide a part of public life as possible.<sup>48</sup> Activists who participated in the 2020 protests and remain in the country continued to be arrested. Activists who have already been convicted faced new charges, additional sentences, and repeated detentions and arrests<sup>49</sup>.

In addition to continued repression of civil society organisations, the regime returned to the repression of grassroots activists, especially those associated with anti-war activities. So only during the first 3 days of the war 1100 people were detained and 630 arrested.<sup>50</sup>

Turning attention to the state's internal repressive strategy, there have also been many normative changes to the legal framework this year. For example, earlier this year, the government brought back into force a law criminalising the organisation and participation in unregistered NGOs, which can result in up to two years in prison<sup>51</sup>.

In February, a constitutional reform was passed, which, for the first time, included the notion of civil society. However, this notion is different from international standards and has yet to meet the expectations of the third sector.<sup>52</sup>

In July, Belarus also withdrew from the Aarhus Convention, which addresses critical aspects of the relationship between peoples and their governments. Its goals include not only environmental protection and sustainable development but also responsibility, transparency, and accountability of government actions<sup>53</sup>.

In November, the UN Secretary-General registered a note on denunciation by Belarus of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which means that Belarusians cannot submit individual reports on violations of their rights to the UN Human Rights

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<sup>48</sup> Беларусский Трекер Перемен. (2022). *Экспертные оценки*. Февраль–май 2022. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/19337.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Лепейко Г. (2022). *Беларусь под следствием. Самый полный каталог уголовных дел на протестующих*. Медиазона. Retrieved from <https://mediazona.by/article/2021/01/21/uk>

<sup>50</sup>Зеркало. (2022). *Как белорусы протестуют против войны и как их за это преследуют*. Retrieved from <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/12457.html?c>

<sup>51</sup> Lawtrend. (2022). *Уголовная ответственность за организацию и участие в незарегистрированных организациях*. Retrieved from <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/ugolovnaya-otvetstvennost-za-organizatsiyu-i-uchastie-v-nezaregistrirovannyh-organizatsiyah>

<sup>52</sup> Сайт С.Тихановской. (2022). *Советница Светланы Тихановской по правовым вопросам Кристина Рихтер о проекте Закона «Об основах гражданского общества», принятом 20 декабря 2022 года Палатой представителей в первом чтении*. Retrieved from <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/ru/news/f73acbcc5e76e16.html>

<sup>53</sup> Гаргалыг, Т. (2022). *Выход РБ из Орхусской конвенции: какими будут последствия?*. DW. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/ru/vyход-rb-iz-orhusskoj-konvencii-kakimi-budut-posledstvija/a-62584882>

Commission<sup>54</sup>. By denouncing the protocol, the state has made it clear that it will not fulfil its obligations in the country's human rights protection field.

One of the regime's strategies this year was also to make greater use of legislation aimed at countering extremism, as well as anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism legislation to increase repressive measures. Thus, state banks monitored all operations of public organisations to ensure that they align with their statutory objectives. Lists of organisations and activists deemed reliable have appeared, with whom the authorities are allowed to cooperate and whom they can invite to their events and those of state-owned enterprises. At the same time, an informal restriction on state-owned enterprises that prohibited them from working with CSOs emerged, resulting in a breakdown of pre-existing partnerships.<sup>55</sup>

Databases of extremists and extremist materials, as well as a terrorist database created by law enforcement agencies, were actively updated with new names of activists and organisations. When CSOs were included in these lists, i.e. when the authorities recognised them as extremist formations and their websites and social networks as extremist materials, they blocked their websites and social networks on the territory of the Republic of Belarus. Thus the target audience lost the opportunity to communicate with organisations. People got sentences for subscribing to “extremist websites”, for likes and comments on social networks (CSO Meter, 2022).

Meanwhile, the state media was carrying out rhetoric of hostility towards protest-minded members of society in general and individual civil society organisations and their initiatives in particular, on national television. Not only were opposition democratic forces vilified, but also third-sector organisations and their leaders through state media and official statements.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, a law was passed establishing new mechanisms for competitive public funding (CSO Meter, 2022). However, given the simultaneous “clean-up” of the civil sector, this law effectively limited the receipt of funding only to the loyal GONGOs that conform to state ideology. The state budget for “hand-holding” pro-government civil society, including GONGOs,

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<sup>54</sup> UN Human Rights Committee. (2022). *Выход Беларуси из процедуры рассмотрения индивидуальных жалоб является серьезным препятствием для защиты прав человека*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/ru/press-releases/2022/11/belarus-withdrawal-individual-complaints-procedure-serious-setback-human>

<sup>55</sup> Lawtrend. (2022). *Ситуация со свободой ассоциаций и организациями гражданского общества Республики Беларусь: обзор за август 2022 г.* Retrieved from <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/situatsiya-so-svobodoj-assotsiatsij-i-organizatsiyami-grazhdanskogo-obshhestva-respubliki-belarus-obzor-za-avgust-2022-g>

<sup>56</sup> Алешко-Лесселс, О., & Елисеев, А. (2022). *Дискредитация политических оппонентов в белорусских государственных СМИ и риторика ненависти*. ISANS. Retrieved from <https://isans.org/columns/discrediting-political-opponents-in-the-belarusian-state-media-and-hate-speech.html>

was also increased<sup>57</sup>. In August of the same year, A. Lukashenko revealed that he had instructed the administration of affairs to create a single national fund that would work under the patronage of the president.<sup>58</sup>

As of the end of April 2022, 700 Belarusian NGOs have been liquidated or are in the process of liquidation. There were no registered human rights organisations left in the country<sup>59</sup>.

Continuing the external strategy of transnational repression, the state used preventive repression with elements of intimidation to influence citizens and organisations that have left. The regime utilised new tactics to crack down on those who had left, including pressure on their relatives, house searches, interrogations, break-ins, and arrests. Entire families have been detained and seized, and there have been cases of family hostage-taking, blackmail and recruitment.<sup>60</sup>

For civil society, this year can be characterised as a period of “routinisation” of crisis for CSOs that left and a deep crisis for those that stayed in the country.

Those organisations that remained in the country chose several tactics to survive. Some continued illegal activities but became hidden entirely, while others adapted and moved closer to pro-state structures and GONGOs while continuing contact with state authorities. Some of the organizations chose this path to maintain their target audience. Others have ceased their activities altogether, and some have frozen their activities. The remaining organisations were also subject to surveillance and control by intelligence agencies (Chulitskaya & Rabava, 2022).

The “new” grassroots communities have almost ceased to be visibly active in the country due to fear and constant pressure on their members, and they have also faced the question of how to continue their activities but still achieve their goals and ensure the safety of their members.<sup>61</sup>

The survival tactics of the organisations that left were also varied. Some “old” CSOs that have moved have gradually adapted to new conditions in other countries. Others, even after the move, tried not to publicise their activities for fear of attracting attention that could harm their employees who remained in Belarus and their target audience and not to provoke a new wave of

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<sup>57</sup> Флагшток. (2022). *От управления здравоохранения до БРСМ. Как будет тратиться областной бюджет в 2022 году*. Retrieved from <https://flagshtok.info/by/regieny/u-kogo-zabrali-i-komu-otdali-razbiraem-oblastnoj-bjudzhet-na-2022-god.html>

<sup>58</sup> BELTA. (2022). *Лукашенко высказался о том, каким видит гражданское общество в Беларуси*. Retrieved from <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vyskazalsja-o-tom-kakim-vidit-grazhdanskoe-obschestvo-v-belarusi-507051-2022/>

<sup>59</sup> Lawtrend. (2022). *Мониторинг НКО в Беларуси, находящихся в процессе принудительной ликвидации и принявших решение о самоликвидации*. Retrieved from <https://www.lawtrend.org/liquidation-nko>

<sup>60</sup> Правозащитный центр “Весна”. (2023). *Новые методы преследования в 2022 году несогласных с режимом Лукашенко*. Retrieved from <https://spring96.org/ru/news/110324>

<sup>61</sup> ОЕЭК. (2022). *Можно запретить организацию, но нельзя запретить идею. Год после массовых обысков и принудительной ликвидации ОГО*. Retrieved from <https://oeec.ngo/people/liquidation/>

repression. More active interaction between relocated organisations was observed (CSO Meter, 2022).

### *January-October 2023: Adaptation of civil society to repression*

This year was characterised by “cleaning up” the remaining activism in the country and eliminating the last possible social and civil activism that could be legally manifested. The institution of civil society has effectively become prohibited.

State control was extended to all aspects of life, including searches, and cleansing among disloyal citizens, security checks during employment, access to professional secrets of psychologists, online surveillance, mandatory medical examinations, installation of cameras, access to cameras in taxicabs, access to records in visa centres, and other measures<sup>62</sup>. On May 17, 2023, amendments to the law on the order of entry and exit from Belarus came into force, giving the KGB the right to ban those whose departure “contradicts the interests of national security”<sup>63</sup>.

More than 1,280 non-profit organisations were closed and liquidated by the authorities by 2023<sup>64</sup>. UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus Anaïs Marin emphasised in her latest report that “Belarus has become an example of a country where legislation has become the main tool for cleansing civic space, suppressing freedom of expression and eliminating independent institutions”<sup>65</sup>, referring to the use of legislation on extremism, terrorism and money laundering by security forces against activists and civil society in general.

The state continued to build up the capacity for transnational repression of activists who have left. Some researchers have already called this period an “undeclared” or “silent”<sup>66</sup> war against Belarusians in exile. The state's strategy in this direction included more and more practices, such

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<sup>62</sup> See 56.

<sup>63</sup> Зеркало. (2023). *17 мая КГБ может ограничивать выезд за границу. Попытались узнать, как это будет работать*. Retrieved from <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/39267.html?c>

<sup>64</sup> New Ideas Center. (2023). *Отчёт по исследованию организации гражданского общества Беларуси на начало 2023 года: состояние, связи, потребности, ЦНИ и ЦЕТ, май 2023*. Retrieved from <https://newideas.center/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/%d0%9e%d1%80%d0%b3%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%b0%d1%86%d0%b8%d0%b8 %d0%b3%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b4%d0%b0%d0%bd%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%be %d0%be%d0%b1%d1%89%d0%b5%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b2%d0%b0 %d0%91%d0%b5%d0%bb%d0%b0 %d1%80%d1%83%d1%81%d0%b8.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> Marin, A. (2023). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus (A/78/327)*. United Nations. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/belarus/report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-belarus-anais-marin-a78327-enarruzh>

<sup>66</sup> Беларусский Трекер Перемен. (2023). *Экспертные оценки. Декабрь 22- февраль 23*. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/20149-20230322.pdf>

as trials and sentences in absentia, potential deprivation of citizenship, restrictions on exchanging necessary documents, and the inability to dispose of property<sup>67</sup>.

Assessing the general state of civil society, it should be noted that the repressions of recent years have completely changed its structure and module of action, both physical and virtual. Some organisations could not withstand the crisis and focused only on the physical self-preservation of their members. However, some leaders of the organisations are trying to conduct their activities individually. Activists are attempting to adapt to the new repressive and survival conditions and keep their activities going. However, many of them are in a bad psychological state, experiencing burnout, anxiety, and fatigue from the constant repressive background.<sup>68</sup>

Organisations still trying to operate in Belarus increasingly rely on covert communication channels and word of mouth to reach their target audience. This type of communication makes it difficult for the authorities to monitor the activities of CSOs, but, at the same time, it also makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to obtain information about the work of these organisations. This reaction of the third sector to repression has given rise to one of the new trends of 2023 in the context of repression and restrictions by the authorities - the trend of “invisibility” of civil society in Belarus (Chulitskaya & Rabava, 2023). While it is still unclear how this trend of “invisibility” will develop in the coming years, it is necessary to continue to explore this topic further. For now, it is only clear that as long as the authorities continue to suppress any dissent, civil society will be forced to carry out its activities even more covertly.

Several “new” horizontal initiatives emerged in 2023 at the local level. These groups, although rare, still hold actions while maintaining a conspiratorial and non-public character, their activities becoming as neutral as possible, given the high risks of security and repression (Chulitskaya and Rabava, 2023). It is important to mention that activists and organisations that have migrated abroad try to support such initiatives by passing on their experience and providing as much assistance as possible, including in finding and obtaining funding.<sup>69</sup>

It is worth noting the findings of a survey conducted by Lawtrend and OEEC, which shed light on how Belarusian organisations in exile identify themselves in 2023. According to the survey:

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<sup>67</sup> Беларусский Трекер Перемен. (2022). *Экспертные оценки*. Июнь-август 22. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19564.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> See 60.

<sup>69</sup> See 56.

- 58.2% of CSOs consider themselves partially relocated organisations because most of their members and participants have moved abroad, while some have stayed in Belarus;
- 21.8% of CSOs said that only a few staff members relocated, whereas the majority remained in Belarus;
- 20% of CSOs identify as fully relocated organisations.

Relocation is primarily due to the pressure and harassment that CSO members and participants face. The survey also reveals that 70.9% of CSOs cited pressure on members and participants as the main reason for relocation. In addition, 60% mentioned the general socio-political situation in the country, 54.5% reported administrative or criminal persecution of members and participants, 47.3% complained of pressure on CSOs, such as searches and blocking of bank accounts, and forced liquidation. Also, 27.3% talked about difficulties in accessing funding, and 12.7% mentioned forced cooperation by law enforcement agencies.<sup>70</sup>

Many relocated organisations continue to face a wide range of problems not only in adapting their professional activities but also in adapting to everyday life, with many legal and juridical issues that need to be resolved, from obtaining a visa to opening a foreign bank account and officially registering their activities.<sup>71</sup>

There are also organisations that use a hybrid format (some staff in Belarus, some had to move to other countries), which also have difficulties with security and ideological differences. It is worth mentioning those organisations that are slowly but surely drifting towards GONGO in order to be able to help their target groups and have access to funding.

Briefly summarising, between January and October 2023, organisations and activists in different territorial contexts chose different strategies and reactions to state repression. Those who have left adapt and, for the most part, continue their activities, trying to remain connected to their target group and the country while trying to navigate the new legal, financial, and juridical realities of other countries.

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<sup>70</sup> Lawtrend, ОЕЭК. (2023). *Влияние общественно-политической ситуации в регионе на состояние белорусских организаций гражданского общества. Деятельность ОГО в условиях релокации*. Retrieved from <https://oeec.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/deyatelnost-ogo-v-usloviyah-relokaczii-rus.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> New Ideas Center. (2023). *Отчёт по исследованию организации гражданского общества Беларуси на начало 2023 года: состояние, связи, потребности, ЦНИ и ЦЕТ, май 2023*. Retrieved from [https://newideas.center/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/%d0%9e%d1%80%d0%b3%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%b0%d1%86%d0%b8%d0%b8\\_%d0%b3%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b4%d0%b0%d0%bd%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%be\\_%d0%be%d0%b1%d1%89%d0%b5%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b2%d0%b0\\_%d0%91%d0%b5%d0%bb%d0%b0%d1%80%d1%83%d1%81%d0%b8.pdf](https://newideas.center/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/%d0%9e%d1%80%d0%b3%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%b0%d1%86%d0%b8%d0%b8_%d0%b3%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b4%d0%b0%d0%bd%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%be_%d0%be%d0%b1%d1%89%d0%b5%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b2%d0%b0_%d0%91%d0%b5%d0%bb%d0%b0%d1%80%d1%83%d1%81%d0%b8.pdf)

Organisations remaining in the country try to minimise their activities, becoming “invisible” both to law enforcement agencies and partly to their target groups until the next round of repression. They are also trying to survive without funding and the possibility of legal work. Not everyone manages to do this, so some organisations cease or freeze their activities altogether.



## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we summarise the data we obtained and analysed. Thus, civil society and the regime of Belarus have always had rather difficult relations. Over the years, the authorities have consistently attempted to control and suppress the third sector, employing a range of repressive tactics to do so. One of the primary methods utilised was re-registration, which consistently failed for a significant percentage of organisations. In response, many organisations operated “underground” and without registration, attempting to avoid fines or prison sentences.

In addition to re-registrations, the state also employed other measures of control and suppression, such as complicating the legislation surrounding the activities of CSOs, as well as financial, tax, and administrative measures. These preventive measures, employed by the regime over the past two decades, have provided a basis for the subsequent tightening of the screws in recent years.

However, these old methods have been supplemented with new practices. For example, the state has begun to use transnational repression more frequently, which is explained by the large number of “new” activists of civil society who have managed to leave the country.

The main trends of these years (2020-2023) are also of interest, both in the repressive strategy of the state and in the reformatting of civil society in the country.

Repressive strategies employed by the state are of particular interest, as the regime used at least two tactics. The first is the internal strategy of a “scorched field”, where the regime cleared the space of any possible civic activity by tightening legislation, inspections by various government agencies, and open blackmail and threats from the security bloc. These efforts were combined with the parallel construction of an alternative reality of civil society, where attempts were made to replace the destroyed CSOs to GONGOs, as well as attempts to nationalise independent NGOs that have not yet been liquidated to allow them to operate under the conditions and control of the state.

The second strategy is external, associated with transnational repressions, in which the state first attempted to identify those who had left, then tried to return them, and ultimately decided in 2023 to take revenge and blackmail them.

Looking at the trends of civil society reformatting, it can be seen that the main process started during the COVID-19 epidemic and continued in 2020 when there was an explosion of social and political activity. By the time of the presidential elections, it was already possible to assume that the broad protesting civil masses could be called a “new” civil society. This assumption was confirmed after the mass protests when people began to unite into small groups, initiatives, and even full-fledged organisations. This was the process of formation of the “new” civil society. This

juxtaposition of the “new” civil society was very heterogeneous and more or less took shape only after the first mass wave of emigration in 2020.

In the same year, another trend emerged associated with the division of the third sector into those who remained in the country and those who left. In 2021, the “old” civil society joined this trend after the second massive wave of relocation. It became possible to divide the entire third sector not only into a diverse “new” and established “old” sector but also into many variations in the territorial location of both activists and organisations.

Following these divisions, all groups reacted differently to repression over time and chose different strategies. Those who remained in the country either stopped their activities, froze, or conducted their activities almost underground, becoming “invisible” not only to the repressive authorities but also to their own local audience. Those who left chose a strategy of adaptation and survival, facing, in addition to repressive practices, also the difficulties of emigration and adaptation in another country.

Further observations of the sector and its responses to the repressive methods used by the state are of great interest for additional study, as well as deepening the topic with a more focused dive into individual CSO groups.

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