



CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

**2023
BELARUS**

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Disclaimer:

The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and editorial committee and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID and FHI 360.

Cover Photo:

Meeting on signing letters to political prisoners on the Day of Solidarity with Belarusian political prisoners on May 21 in Warsaw.

Photo Credit:

Human Rights Center "Viasna", spring96.org

INTRODUCTION

FHI 360 and our partners CSO Fusion and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are pleased to present the twenty-fourth edition of the Civil Society Organization (CSO) Sustainability Index for Belarus, covering the developments in the civil society sector in 2023. This report is a testament to the courage and dedication of Belarusian civic activists inside the country and those forced into exile who continue to work towards a democratic, sovereign Belarus, despite the relentless repression by the current government. It is thanks for their efforts that Belarusian civil society has not only survived, albeit with great difficulty, but adapted to advance peace, justice and prosperity in Belarus.

Launched by USAID more than a quarter century ago, the Index has provided local CSOs, donors, academics, and others with critical information on trends affecting the effectiveness and vitality of CSO sector. Throughout the years, it has documented advances and setbacks in seven key components or “dimensions” of civil society’s sustainability: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, sectoral infrastructure, and public image.

The Index’s methodology relies on CSO practitioners and researchers who form an expert panel to assess these dimensions based on factual developments during the year in review. The panel agrees on a score for each dimension, which ranges from 1 (the most enhanced level of sustainability) to 7 (the most impeded). The component ratings are then averaged to produce an overall sustainability score for the CSO sector. An editorial committee reviews the panel’s scores and the corresponding narrative reports, with the aim of maintaining consistent approaches and standards to facilitate cross-year and that scores are well supported in the narrative with evidence. Further details about the methodology used to calculate scores and produce narrative reports can be found in the annex to this report.

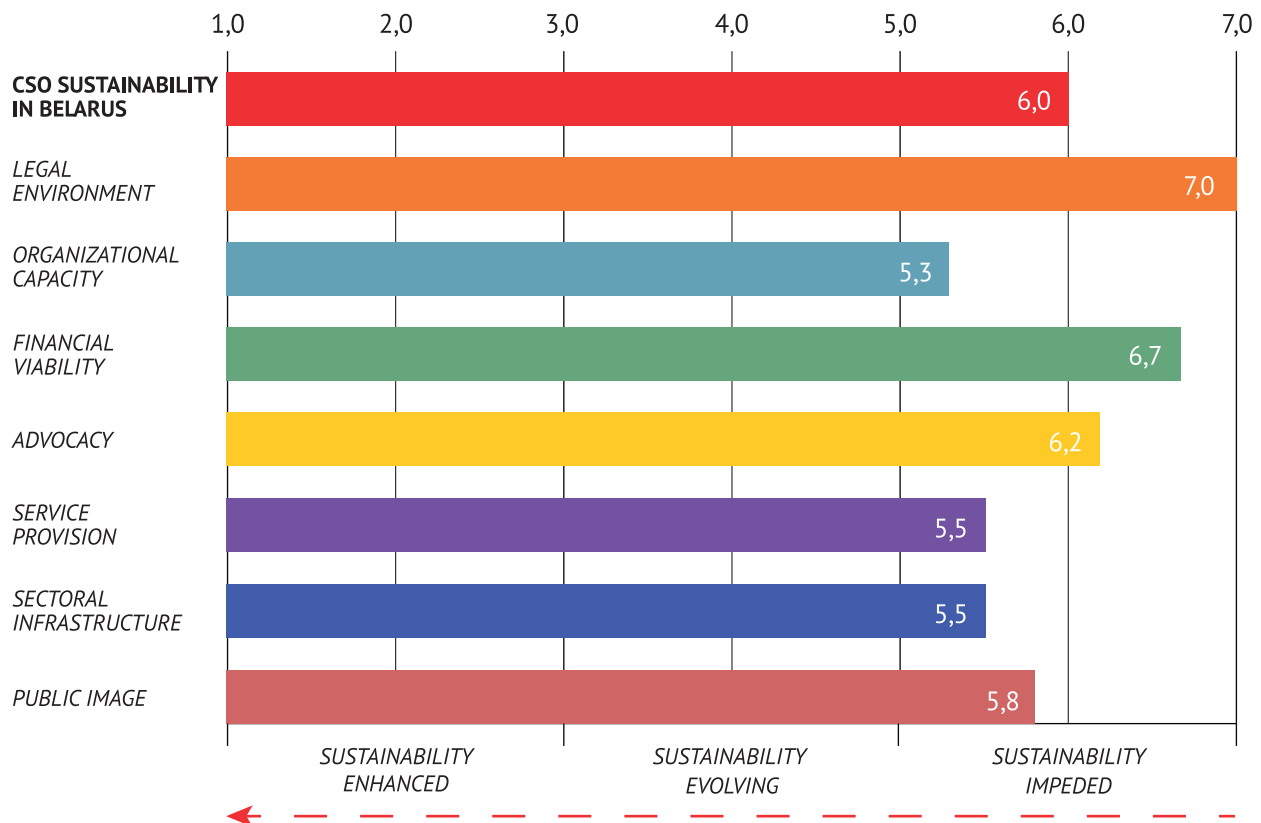
The CSO Sustainability Index, following the same methodology with only modest adaptations, has been conducted globally for a broad range of countries since 2010 allowing to trace the trends and developments in the civil society sectors over time. While the global CSOSI report is not being produced for 2023, FHI 360, CSO Fusion and USAID decided to use this test methodology to prepare the Belarus edition. For a country where access to reliable information is so limited, the report provides insights about the sector that operates under uniquely restrictive circumstances and was prepared so that Belarusian civic actors and their international allies can use the analysis to enhance the impact of their work.

A publication of this type would not be possible without the contributions of many individuals and organizations. We are especially grateful to the individuals who participate in the expert panels, sharing their unique knowledge and expertise despite the risk of persecution. Their rich knowledge and thoughtful analysis are the foundation upon which this Index is based. In addition, special thanks are due to CSO Fusion, Belarusian experts who served as authors of the report, Erin McCarthy of USAID, and my FHI 360 colleagues – Ruta Valaityte, Junela Salnikava, and David Lenett. This report would not exist without their contributions.

*Happy reading,
Susan Jay,
Project Director-Lithuania, FHI 360*

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY:

6.0 (2022: 6.0)



A deepening human rights crisis; ongoing mass repression against the political opposition, CSOs, media, and various social groups; as well as Russia's continued military aggression against Ukraine, supported by the Belarusian regime, continued to define the situation in Belarus in 2023. In addition, the regime's relentless efforts to suppress any alternative opinions created a climate of fear and uncertainty.

In 2023, Belarusian human right defenders documented 6,386 cases of criminal and administrative repression. As of December 31, 2023, at least 1,452 Belarusians were recognized by human rights defenders as political prisoners. Approximately 1,000 more political prisoners have been released since 2020 due to the completion of their sentences, pardons, or procedural changes. The authorities increasingly subjected political prisoners to torture and other forms of ill-treatment including depriving them of the right to communicate with their family members.

Representatives of CSOs operating in Belarus continued to face detentions, arrests, searches, interrogations, and other types of pressure and persecution. The wave of CSO liquidations that began in 2020 persisted. According to human rights organization Lawtrend, in 2023, a decision of forced liquidation was taken in relation to at least 203 CSOs, and 133 decided to self-liquidate to avoid persecution and other risks. In total, since 2020, the Belarusian third sector lost at least 1,509 institutionalized CSOs. As in earlier years, authorities continued to widely use counter-extremism and counter-terrorism legislation to suppress civic activity.

According to various estimates, since 2020 about 400-500 thousand people have left Belarus to escape the political crisis, repression, and economic insecurity. The regime continues to persecute those in exile, including by introducing special legal proceedings, allowing trials to be held in absentia, persecuting relatives of relocated activists in Belarus, and imposing stricter conditions on their lives abroad. For instance, since September 2023, Belarusian diplomatic missions have ceased issuing passports and providing other consular services to citizens residing abroad. Belarusians with expiring passports face the choice of staying abroad without a valid document (which puts them in legal jeopardy in many countries) or returning home to face likely prosecution.

The gap between Belarusian CSOs inside the country and those in exile has been growing. Belarus-based CSOs face significant restrictions and challenges in their work compared to organizations and initiatives operating from other countries, which leads to the development of different goals, agendas, planning horizons, and management practices between the two groups. At the same time, CSOs inside the country have had much greater direct access to their target groups, which was a significant advantage compared to exiled CSOs.

Despite all the challenges, Belarusian CSOs demonstrated resilience and adaptability to continue their activities and drive positive change. Even amidst changing conditions, many CSOs were able to maintain their capacities, restructure their work more effectively, and find new ways to deliver services. New CSOs have emerged both within the country and abroad. International solidarity and support were important factors in keeping the Belarusian civil society alive.

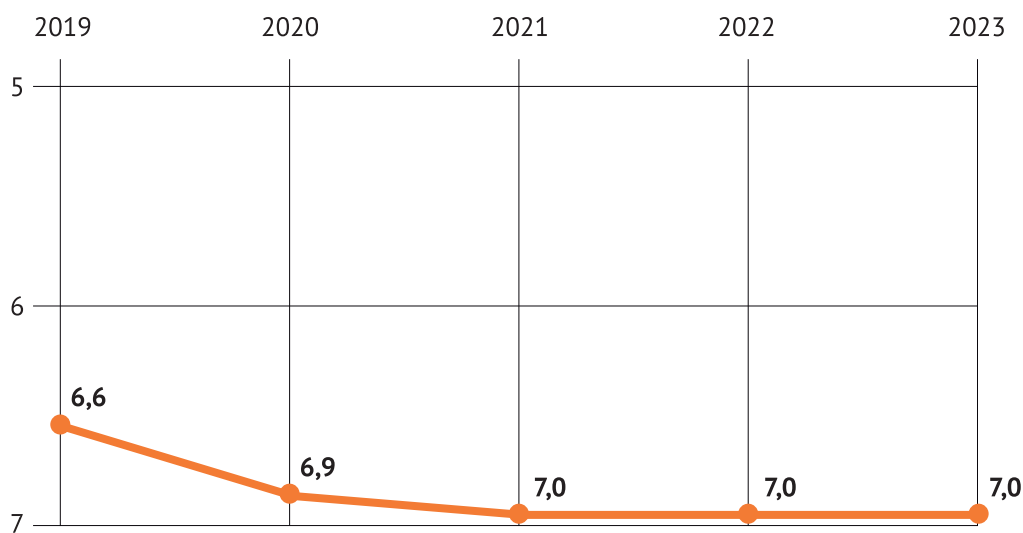
According to the human rights organization Lawtrend, as of December 31, 2023, approximately 2,330 CSOs in three legal forms were registered in Belarus: 1,761 public associations, 118 foundations, and 451 non-governmental institutions. Among these, 675 are sports and dance organizations and 374 organizations work in the social, charity, and healthcare sectors. Between 2021 and 2023, only 156 new non-profit organizations were registered in Belarus, the majority focused on sports, charitable, educational, or environmental activities. Liquidation procedures against these organizations have not been initiated yet.

It is also important to note that the conditions for collecting and verifying data on CSOs located inside Belarus deteriorated significantly in 2023.

Most information about the state of the sector comes from studies and assessments conducted by organizations that work from exile. Inside Belarus, there is limited publicly available data on CSO activities, and experts residing in Belarus often refrain from participating in studies and surveys due to concerns for their safety.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT:

7.0 (2022: 7.0)



The legal environment for Belarusian CSOs slightly deteriorated in 2023. However, as the score for the previous years since 2021 was already the worst possible score according to the CSO Sustainability Index methodology it remains unchanged since 2021.

The practice of mass repression against CSOs and civil society activists has continued. CSOs faced various forms of harassment and pressure, including raids, inspections, suspension of activities, blockage of CSO websites, administrative and criminal charges, interrogations of CSO staff and volunteers, and pressure on relatives and loved ones of those associated with CSOs. In 2023, the Ministry of Justice conducted inspections of over a thousand public associations and issued written warnings to 410 registered CSOs, mostly for minor issues, such as violations of record-keeping procedures, and reporting deadlines. Such warnings may be used as a basis for forced liquidation. Certain individuals were forcibly excluded from membership in organizations by threatening the organizations' leadership with liquidation. For instance, political prisoner Ales Pushkin (several weeks before his death in prison) and nine other members of the Belarusian Union of Artists were forcibly expelled from the organization.

The state's campaign to formally liquidate CSOs, which began in the middle of 2021, continued into 2023. Although the number of liquidated CSOs in 2023 slightly decreased compared to 2021 and 2022, this happened primarily because there were fewer organizations to be liquidated due to the large-scale liquidation efforts in previous years. Since the post-election period in 2020, Belarus had lost at least 1,509 institutionalized CSOs, of which at least 203 were liquidated and 133 more self-liquidated in 2023.

Only a few new initiatives, some of which include previously liquidated CSOs, attempted to officially register. In some cases, the registration of new CSOs was directly overseen or instructed by the authorities. The Ministry of Justice does not provide quantitative data on CSO registrations for 2023. According to data independently compiled by Lawtrend, at least 13 non-governmental establishments, 3 foundations, and 17 public associations were registered throughout the year. Some initiatives registered and operated as commercial organizations or individual entrepreneurs, but such legal status did not protect them from government harassment and repression.

As of 2023, public associations working at the national level are required to establish regional branches in Minsk and all other regions (oblasts) of Belarus, each of which needs to have a legal address in non-residential premises. Independent organizations with limited resources find it nearly impossible to meet this requirement. 2023 also saw the passing of the new version of the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," which will come into force on July 6, 2024. The law tightens registration requirements and procedures for religious organizations and obliges them to re-register. In 2023 the state exerted significant pressure on clergymen, including criminal charges against some. For example, the religious community of the Full Gospel Christians Church "New Life" was liquidated, and its online resources were labeled "extremist." Political parties, public associations, and religious organizations were required to ensure compliance with the state's main domestic and foreign policies, allegedly to mitigate national security threats, or they may face liquidation.

The practice of remaking civil society in the shape of government-organized "non-governmental" organizations (GONGOs) continued. On February 14, 2023, the Law "On Essentials of Civil Society," established a hierarchy of CSOs based on their level of interaction with the state, creating especially favorable conditions for 5 organizations: the Republican Public Association "Belaya Rus," the Belarusian Public Association of Veterans, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the Belarusian Women's Union, and the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus. The authorities supported the activities of certain state-affiliated organizations while harassing independent CSOs. The practice of discrediting independent CSOs on pro-government media continued.

The state also continued suppressing civic activity by using the legislation on countering extremism and terrorism. The number of criminal cases related to

organizing and participating in “extremist formations” increased significantly in 2023. The practice of labeling CSOs as “extremist formations” expanded, including the application of the label to previously liquidated CSOs such as the Belarusian Association of Journalists, SYMPA, the Belarusian Students' Association, and the Human Rights Center Viasna.

Over a hundred CSO representatives were serving their prison sentences having been convicted under various trumped-up charges related to “extremist activity,” calls for sanctions, organizing and financing actions that violate public order, and others. In some cases, these people were included into the lists of individuals involved in extremist and/or terrorist activities. In 2023, art manager Pavel Belavus, founder of the Art Syadziba space and an ethnically themed online souvenir shop Symbal.by, was sentenced to 13 years in a strict regime colony. Human rights defender and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski was sentenced to 10 years in prison, while his colleagues from Viasna, Valiantsin Stefanovich and Uladzimir Labkovich, were sentenced to 9 and 7 years, respectively. Political analyst and editor of the analytical website Nashe Mneniye (Our Opinion) Valeryia Kastsyuhova and SYMPA co-founder and BIPART expert Tatiana Kouzina were each sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Repression also affected CSO representatives who were forced to leave the country. They were subject to criminal legislation provisions for special (in absentia) proceedings, their houses were searched, and property seized. By Decree No. 278 “On the Procedure for Issuing Documents and Performing Actions,” the possibility of renewing a Belarusian citizen’s passport outside of Belarus was rescinded, leading to numerous challenges in legalizing residence for Belarusians abroad.

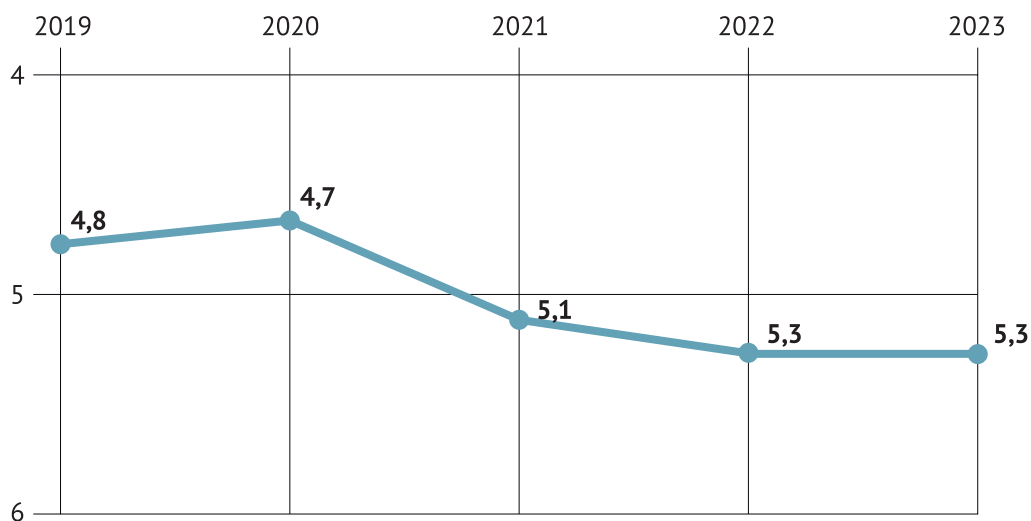
Access for CSOs remaining in Belarus to both local and foreign funding has significantly shortened. The general atmosphere of fear and numerous criminal cases for donations to solidarity funds demotivated donations to CSOs. CSOs can only officially receive foreign aid for a narrow list of allowable purposes that does not include human rights, gender equality, and many other types of CSO activities. In addition, CSOs must register the aid with the government. Meanwhile the state approved changes to the Law “On Local Governance and Self-Government in the Republic of Belarus” allowing CSOs, including unregistered ones, to receive funding from municipal budget. Such legislation is a progressive step, however, under the conditions of mass repression, lack of free access to information, liquidation of CSOs, prosecution for activism, and criminal liability for organizing and participating in unregistered organizations, such legislation becomes a basis for abuse and discrimination of more independent initiatives while providing support only to those that are loyal to the authorities.

If CSOs registered as foundations or institutions engaged in business activities, the income from such endeavors was subject to taxation at the same rates as the income of any commercial entity.

Access to legal assistance for CSOs was hindered due to the forced relocation abroad of organizations that traditionally provided pro-bono legal services to CSOs, as well as due to persecution of Belarusian attorneys who represent CSOs. Organizations operating in exile require legal support not only on Belarusian law matters but also on issues related to setting up and operating legal entities in the countries of relocation.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY:

5.3 (2022: 5.3)



In 2023, Belarusian CSOs were able to maintain their organizational capacity at the 2022 level. The situation of Belarus-based CSOs and CSOs operating in exile differed substantially.

Both CSOs operating in Belarus and abroad have adapted to the changed environment and were already planning their activities for longer terms. At the same time, not all CSOs understand the distinctions between strategic, tactical, and operational planning. Results-oriented planning and management remained challenging for them. While some CSOs redefined their missions in 2023, most exiled CSOs continued to work for the benefit of Belarus. According to a study of CSO activities in exile conducted by the Organization for European Expertise and Communications (OEEC) and Lawtrend, 89% of respondents noted that their CSOs focused their activities on target groups located in Belarus. At the same time, the share of CSOs that focus their activities on the Belarusian diaspora had slightly increased in comparison to a similar study conducted in 2022.

Most CSOs measure the success of their work at the level of individual projects, focusing more on such short-term results like outreach, number of events conducted, and services provided, rather than on the impact of their work on their target groups. The evaluation of programs and the overall effectiveness of CSO activities, as well as conducting regular organizational diagnostics, has not yet become a common practice among CSOs.

According to the study “Civil Society Organizations in Belarus at the Beginning of 2023: State, Connections, Needs,” conducted by the Center for New Ideas together with the Center for European Transformation, many CSOs faced challenges in continuing their work, but in most cases, they were able to find resources to address these challenges by holding strategic planning sessions, taking advantage of input from consultants, and formulating more robust internal policies and procedures.

Regarding the governance structure of CSOs, it is important to note that membership-based organizations dealing with disability rights, youth work, environmental protection and other issues remained primarily in Belarus. Formerly membership-based organizations did not manage to restore their membership-based structure after their relocation abroad. Most Belarusian CSOs registered abroad were registered by one to three founders, who are also members of the organization's staff. Such organizations do not have a clear division of responsibilities between the board and staff members. In many CSOs, governing bodies are often symbolic.

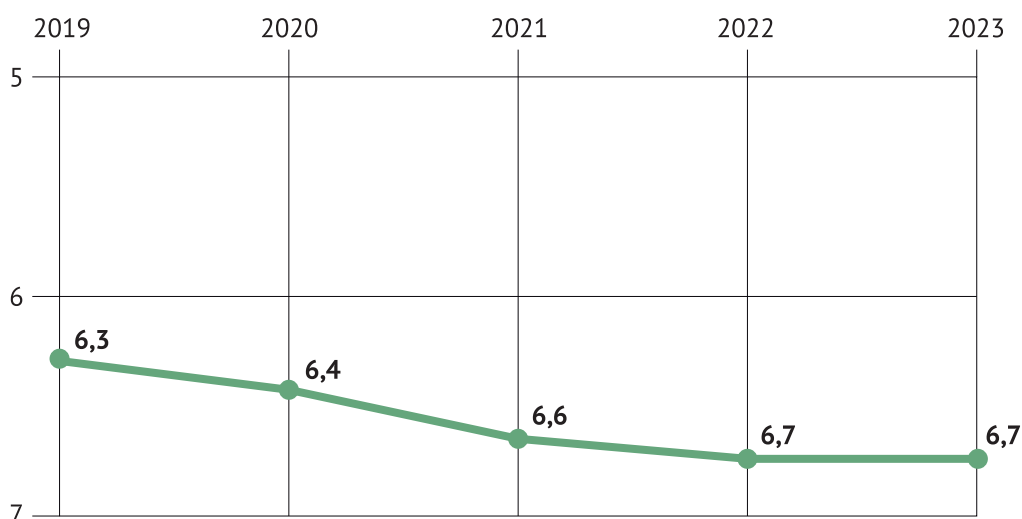
In 2023, CSOs and their representatives continued to relocate from Belarus. As before, CSO representatives who continued their work inside the country found themselves in highly risky conditions, faced pressure and threats of persecution, and in most cases did not have stable income. The results of the study conducted by the Center for New Ideas and the Center for European Transformation indicate that security, mental resilience and medical issues among team members were the most common problems faced by in-country Belarusian CSOs. These organizations could not solve these problems on their own: “Most of the unmet needs of Belarusian CSOs today are associated with teamwork. First of all, there is a need to ensure the personal safety of employees and volunteers given the current level of repression in the country, and to overcome the psychological (and sometimes medical) consequences of working in traumatic conditions.” In other studies, civic activists reported poor psychological and physical state that led to a deterioration in their motivation, quality of their work and caused activists to leave the sector. All of these factors contributed to a shortage of qualified staff in CSOs, including top managers, financial officers, and fundraisers.

The technical advancement of CSOs remained basically unchanged in 2023. In-country activists and CSO staff continued to face confiscation of equipment during searches in their homes or offices, access to some software and IT tools was impeded as a result of international sanctions against Belarus and limita-

tions to financial transfers from Belarusian bank accounts. At the same time, many CSOs made progress in ensuring their digital security and acquiring digital tools, while some organizations and initiatives started to incorporate artificial intelligence-based tools into their work.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY:

6.7 (2022: 6.7)



The financial viability of Belarusian CSOs remained greatly impeded due to persisting challenges in attracting and using domestic and foreign funding inside Belarus. There was a significant increase in the criminal prosecution of individuals for donating to CSOs, which was labeled by the authorities as financing of extremist activities. Along with these challenges and politically motivated unequal access of CSOs to foreign financing, the role of local funding for Belarus-based CSOs has slightly grown, though remaining far short of sectoral needs.

For CSOs operating inside Belarus access to international funding diminished, mostly due to very strict limitations for receiving foreign funds for non-commercial activities. In March 2023, the Nobel peace prize laureate Ales Bialiatski and his colleagues from the Human Rights Center Viasna were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment for violating the criminal code articles tied to financial procedures. This case, along with other cases of criminal prosecution targeting CSO leaders and activists, made many CSOs wary of foreign funding.

At the same time, the persecution of individuals for donations to human rights organizations or in support of the victims of repression was a growing trend. In 2023, hundreds of individuals were pressured by the authorities to "compensate" for their donations by making forced transfers of money to state or related social organizations (such as hospitals or orphanages). These forced contributions were ten times or even higher than the amount of the original donation some of which were made as early as 2020. Those who refused to comply with these demands were threatened with criminal prosecution and lengthy imprisonment. The exact number of those who faced such extortion is unknown but by the end of 2023, at least 66 individuals had been sentenced to imprisonment for their financial donations.

Some foreign donors have cut or reduced funding for Belarusian civil society. Some foundations and programs completely ceased support for democracy and civil society development in Belarus, arguing that such activities are not feasible under the current conditions. Due to operational and security-related reasons other donors had to focus on supporting CSOs operating from abroad. In addition, there are donors that practice smaller grants to keep civic activities inside Belarus going.

Along with restrictions regarding foreign financing, the government created new mechanisms of state funding of grassroots activities. Article 36-1 of the Law "On Local Governance and Self-Government in the Republic of Belarus" established a competitive mechanism for local civic initiatives to receive state funding in a format similar to participatory budgets, where the local community can receive funds to address local issues. This law, as well as the amendments to the Law "On the Essentials of State Youth Policy" which is related to the financing of youth initiatives, allow state funding to be allocated to unregistered initiatives that previously were not eligible to receive state funding. The state budget for 2024 provides 650,000 dollars to support local civil initiatives. The first grants under this procedure were solicited in autumn 2023. In addition, at the end of 2023 the pro-governmental public association "Belaya Rus" implemented a program of small grants.

This state funding is likely to only benefit groups that are pro-government or affiliated to local authorities. Previously liquidated independent CSOs are wary of applying for such funding for fear of increased harassment, as participation in activities of an unregistered organization was criminalized in 2021.

Despite the changes introduced in December 2023 to the law "On Social Services," the system of state social contracting has not undergone significant changes. As before, these funds were only available to a narrow circle of organizations in specific fields of activity. Direct state funding was available only to a few organizations most loyal to the authorities. Funding to these GONGOs continued to increase in 2023.

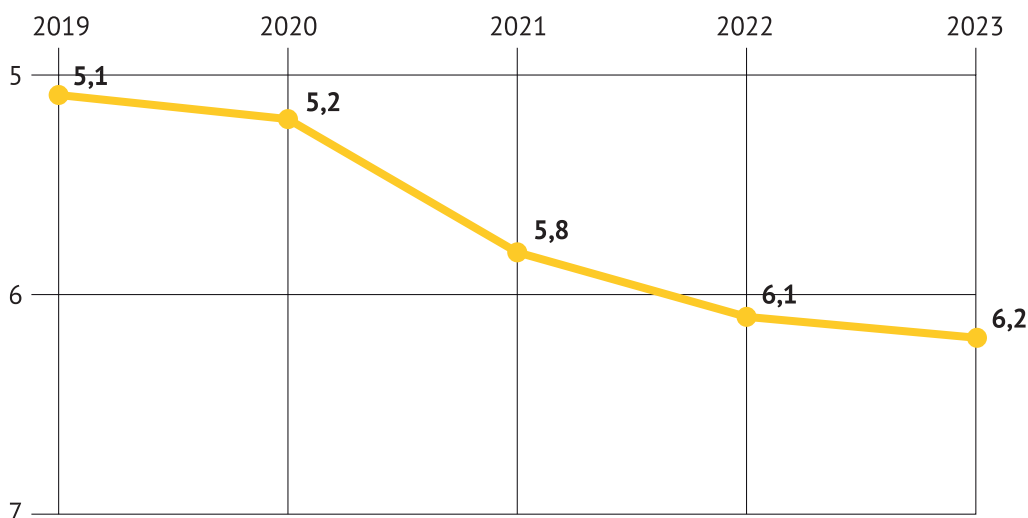
According to the study of CSO activities in exile conducted by OEEC and Lawtrend, 36.4% of CSOs participating in the survey noted that the amount of their funding decreased after their forced relocation abroad, 29.1% said that the amount of funding remained the same, and 23.6% stated that their funding had increased. Many CSOs that indicated an overall increase in the amount of funding note that the share of their administrative costs increased causing, in turn, a decrease in the amount of funding for activities. Belarusian CSOs registered in Lithuania and Poland used the possibility to receive 1.2% and 1.5% respectively of income taxes that people can donate to non-profit organizations in these countries. However, this source of funding so far is marginal.

Contradictory trends are observed in the area of social entrepreneurship and CSO financing through service provision. On the one hand, reduced access to foreign funding is pushing CSOs operating in Belarus toward social entrepreneurship and to resume their activities as commercial entities or individual entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the entrepreneurial sphere is influenced by the state's regulatory policies, which include licensing and mandatory accreditation requirements. For instance, in 2023, re-accreditation requirements affected the sectors of cultural and mass events, physical education and sports activities, and certain aspects of social service provision. As a result of the re-accreditation requirement, cultural CSOs that organize concerts or other cultural events inside the country are pushed to cooperate with state cultural institutions or large commercial organizations in order to conduct such activities in compliance with the law. While each of these accreditations directly affect a limited number of activists and CSOs working in specific fields, collectively they complicate CSOs' access to entrepreneurship activities.

Regarding the financial management of CSOs, the situation remains unchanged, characterized by two contrasting sets of practices. One practice involves financial management conducted in compliance with the strict Belarusian regulatory requirements. The other set of practices is used by CSOs that operate discreetly and cannot safely employ good financial management practices used in more democratic environments. Standard procedures ensuring transparency and accountability, such as segregation of responsibilities, and detailed audits can later be used by authorities to persecute CSO representatives. CSOs in exile are better able to implement at least some good financial management practices though such efforts also carry security risks, especially to staff or partners residing in Belarus.

ADVOCACY:

6.2 (2022: 6.1)



In a near-totalitarian dictatorship such as Belarus, advocacy as a form of activity is almost impossible. Under the hazardous context of the ongoing liquidation of CSOs and repression against their representatives, advocacy targeting decision-making in government bodies has almost ceased in Belarus, save for some modest local level efforts. Although, it would be wrong to say that there is no advocacy at all. Activists who continue to operate in Belarus are still making some advocacy efforts. While civil society largely views targeting authorities as not productive, CSOs in exile are actively engaged in international advocacy and working to shape public opinion (both inside and outside the country, as much as possible).

Nevertheless, there appears to be less and less advocacy over time. To use a sample indicator, the number of collective appeals through the Petitions.by platform has been significantly decreasing each year. In 2021, there were 400 such appeals, in 2022 – less than 370, and in 2023 – only about 200. Advocacy has also been made harder by such actions such as the continued "purge" of public councils under state bodies in spring 2023. Of the few CSO representatives who had still remained in these councils, many were expelled.

Advocacy within Belarus has been reduced to the level of individual activists advocating to solve local problems. These efforts were in the form of individual or collective citizen appeals to officials on various housing and communal issues. In a broader sense, such issues can be identified as ecological, urban, and social.

CSOs and activists did not actively publicize such cases of micro-advocacy. On the contrary, they strove to atomize and limit the spread of information so as not to attract unnecessary attention from repressive bodies. For the same reason, information was disseminated among only a few hundred reasonably trusted people through closed thematic or community chats. This format can be called clandestine advocacy. However, when civic activities go underground, their opportunities for growth are critically limited. Relatedly, these advocacy efforts also suffered from a lack of local leaders because the activists initiating such local level activities did their best to remain out of the public eye and avoided any associations with 2020 movement of courtyard communities. Since courtyard communities had become one of the most powerful actors of civil society in 2020, they were subject to persistent repression and the most prominent leaders of this movement were subdued.

At the same time, in 2023, the advocacy efforts of illiberal, state affiliated CSOs and GONGOs, imitating public support for state initiatives, increased. For example, in the summer of 2023, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, with the support of the "Headquarters of the Patriotic Forces of Belarus" – an umbrella structure uniting the leaders of the largest GONGOs, pro-government parties, and state-controlled trade unions – launched a campaign to raise funds for the construction of a patriotic center in the Brest Fortress. The head of the Youth Union emphasized that, allegedly, "such an initiative is supported not by individual organizations or citizens, but by the entire Belarusian public."

In 2023, Belarus continued to withdraw from international conventions, thereby reducing the scope of opportunities for international advocacy. In particular, in August, Belarus withdrew from the 1979 Bern Convention on the Conservation of Wild Fauna and Flora, which it had joined in 2013. This withdrawal happened after the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe decided that Belarus was barred from nominating its candidates for any elective positions in the bodies of the Convention. In addition, in November, Belarus suspended its participation in the 1954 European Cultural Convention. It is noteworthy that both conventions were adopted long before the 2020 political crisis in Belarus, and their content has nothing to do with the crisis. However, the presiding attitude, both in Minsk and in Europe, is that Belarus' participation in such cooperative international structures is no longer possible.

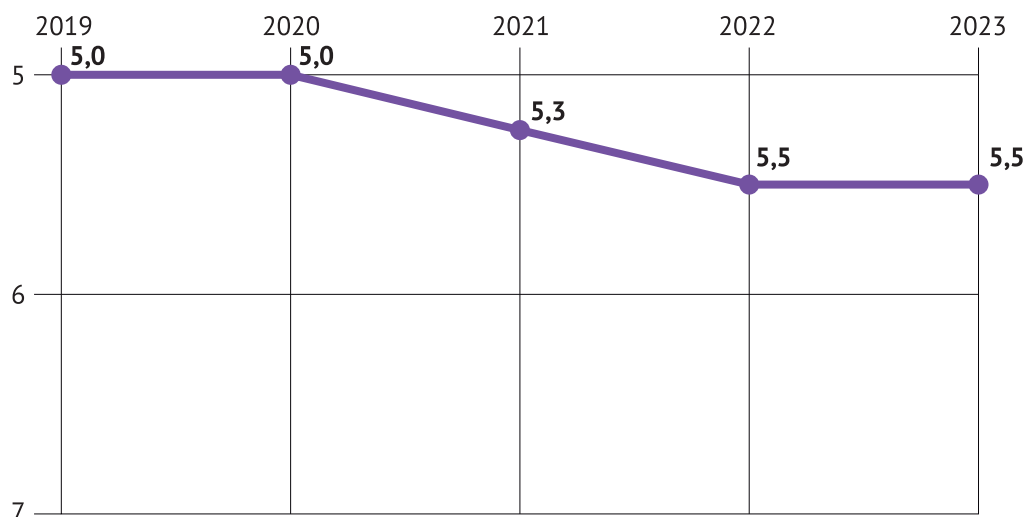
Despite these developments, Belarusian CSOs in exile continued to engage in international advocacy. For example, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee released and promoted the Belarus Human Rights Index among international partners and prepared nine reports and six communiqués within the UN Special Procedures, while a coalition of human rights organizations prepared a report within the framework of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's newly launched Moscow Mechanism.

The Council of Europe's Contact Group on Belarus, consisting of representatives of CSOs and democratic political structures, was also working actively. Thanks to the advocacy efforts of this group, on February 1, 2023, the Council of Europe launched a 15-point action plan to support the Belarusian democratic forces and civil society, where most of the implementing partners were Belarusian CSOs in exile, mainly those that belong to the Contact Group.

In June, in Brussels, the Belarus-EU Consultative Group was launched and attended by representatives of civil society, independent media, human rights organizations, business associations, and political leaders creating a direct channel of communication with the European Commission. In addition, a Strategic Dialogue Initiative between the United States Government and the Belarusian democratic movement and civil society was launched in December.

SERVICE PROVISION:

5.5 (2022: 5.5)



Despite the numerous challenges faced by Belarusian civil society and their gradually diminishing reach of in-country target groups, active CSOs have managed to sustain the variety and quality of services provided both within the country and abroad thanks to their constant search for new ways of interacting with their target groups, adaptability, and the use of digital tools.

At the same time, the ongoing wave of CSO liquidation in Belarus has led to a further decline in the quantity and scale of services provided to target groups within the country. Both the remaining legal organizations and those that have been liquidated now operate extremely cautiously, without public coverage of their activities, and self-censor themselves out of fear of persecution. Some of the ser-

services previously provided by independent CSOs are now being taken over by GONGOs.

The liquidation and relocation of CSOs, labeling CSOs as extremist formations, blocking access to organizations' websites and certain media outlets from within Belarus, along with repressions against beneficiaries of CSOs' services increasingly hindered CSOs' access to their target groups. Within the study "Civil Society Organizations in Belarus at the Beginning of 2023: State, Connections, Needs," conducted by the Center for New Ideas together with the Center for European Transformation, 76% of respondents reported that their CSOs faced reduced opportunities for interacting with target groups. Additionally, 68% noted growing fear among target groups about interactions with CSOs.

In this challenging situation, CSOs rely on informal networks and personal contacts with target groups, as well as various digital tools to interact with beneficiaries. At the same time, it is important to note that some constituents and especially the representatives of vulnerable groups are not always technologically savvy enough to access information about CSO services using a VPN or participate in events via online platforms.

Nevertheless, Belarusian CSOs actively provide a wide range of services in the spheres of civic education, civil society development, support to victims of repression and their families, digital security, culture and national identity, social care, environmental protection, and others. In 2023, new CSOs offering services and advocating for the interests of specific target groups were established in exile. The most notable are the Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners and Former Political Prisoners, the Association of Belarusian Veterans Who Fought for Ukraine, the Belarusian Institute of Theater, and the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers.

As before, many services are provided remotely in an online format. Most Belarusian CSOs that had temporarily shifted their focus to providing assistance related to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 returned to their regular agendas that focus on Belarus.

Due to narrowing access to target groups, CSOs regularly conducted needs assessments of their clients through online surveys, interviews, and focus groups. In 2023, CSOs began to increasingly engage sociologists and other specialists in conducting research of their target groups.

To ensure the safety of their teams and beneficiaries, CSOs often verify potential event participants through representatives of other organizations who can prove the eligibility of people applying to participate. This practice often leads to the exclusion of new activists who have just entered the sector and do not yet have a wide enough circle of acquaintances to provide a reference.

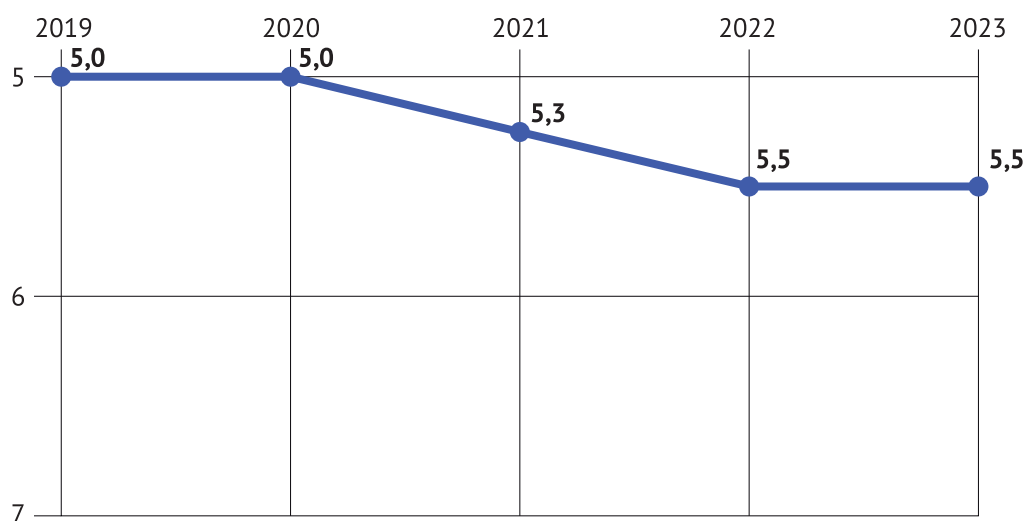
Although the vast majority of CSOs provide services with the support of international donors, in 2023, there were more attempts to partially cover the costs of service provision by charging fees or requiring the participants of offline

events to pay certain expenses, such as travel costs, by themselves.

The government was ready to recognize the value of services offered only by socially oriented CSOs and GONGOs. The practice of state-controlled social contracting mechanisms remained in the healthcare and social protection sectors, yet in a highly limited form. The regime's previously launched targeted campaign to discredit and defame civil society organizations and their activities continued in 2023.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE:

5.5 (2022: 5.5)



The infrastructure supporting the Belarusian CSO sector remained largely unchanged in 2023. However, the situation concerning support services and training opportunities available to CSOs, cooperation within the sector, and collaboration with other stakeholders varied significantly between Belarus and the primary countries where exiled CSOs relocated.

The absolute majority of intermediary support organizations and CSO resource centers that offer technical assistance, training, and other capacity-building services to Belarusian CSOs are based abroad. Such services are provided by the Belarusian Council for Culture, the Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House, Belarusian National Youth Council RADA, international consortium EuroBelarus, OEEC, and other CSOs. Although many of these organizations serve

both CSOs inside Belarus and those operating in exile, access to their services from inside the country remains limited. In cities where the Belarusian diaspora is large, such as Warsaw, Vilnius, Tbilisi, Batumi, Bialystok and Krakow, there are organizations that offer Belarusian activists and CSOs co-working spaces and venues for hosting events, training sessions, consultations, and networking opportunities. At the same time, there is a lack of comprehensive and long-term organizational development programs, which directly affects the organizational capacity of Belarusian CSOs and initiatives.

In 2023, Belarusian CSOs had access to a wide variety of short-term trainings and workshops. Some organizations, such as Belarusian National Youth Council RADA, OEEC, the youth organization The Others, and Goethe-Institute offered longer online-courses often accompanied by mentoring in the fields of fundraising, planning, project and team management, integrating cross-cutting values into CSO work, and communications. However, the demand for additional training on the issues of organizational and risk management, conflict resolution, and financial management remains high. As in 2022, CSOs inside Belarus continued to face a critical shortage of experienced trainers, facilitators, organizational development consultants, and security specialists since many of them relocated abroad or left the CSO sector altogether.

Throughout the year, organizations such as Belarusian Council for Culture, Belarusian Human Rights House, BYSOL Foundation, and the project “Octopus: Education for Belarusian Children Today and Tomorrow” re-granted funds received from foreign donors to CSOs in Belarus and abroad through small grants competitions. In addition, several more solicitations were coordinated by Belarusian CSOs without a public announcement of the call for proposals. In 2023, the New Belarus online platform launched a digital self-government project titled “Build Your Own,” allowing Belarusians in Lithuania and Poland to donate part of their taxes to certain organizations, and then decide which Belarusian projects or initiatives to support with the collected funds. More than 265 people collected about 47,000 euros, which, via intermediary civil society organizations, were used to open a Belarusian library in Vilnius and create a website about the history of Belarus.

Although the study conducted by the Center for New Ideas and the Center for European Transformation revealed that CSO representatives are short on information about the activities of their colleagues in the sector, relocated Belarusian CSOs collaborated by launching joint activities and projects, promoting common agendas, and building coalitions. In July 2023, more than 20 media and human rights organizations and political structures conducted the “We Care!” marathon, raising over 574,000 euros for Belarusian political prisoners and their families. A number of new thematic and geographic coalitions of CSOs emerged in 2023. For example, on October 30, Belarusian experts, activists, and CSOs focused on environmental issues announced the establishment of the Green

Belarus Alliance. In November, nine Belarusian CSOs in Estonia united into an informal coalition called the Association of Belarusian Communities in Estonia, aimed at strengthening ties between the Belarusian diaspora and Estonian society. The Association of Belarusian Businesses Abroad actively developed during the past year, engaging new members, providing services to them, and building relations with other CSOs.

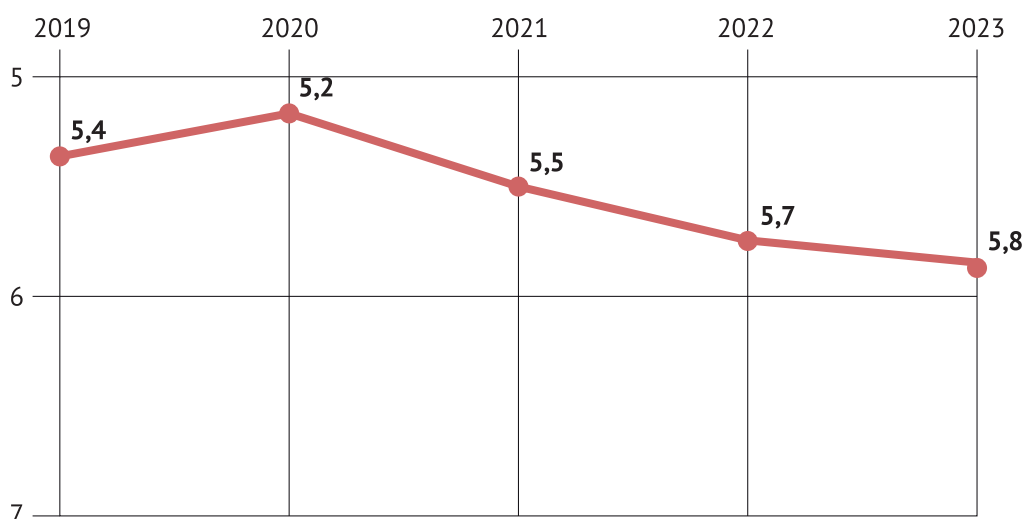
Meanwhile, Belarus-based CSOs considered any formal cooperation to be risky, generally remained atomized and maintained only minimal informal interaction, even with longstanding partners. In this regard, the gap between CSOs inside Belarus and those operating in exile continued to grow.

Cooperation between CSOs and businesses remained limited. Some organizations, such as BYSOL Foundation, actively developed relations with private companies and entrepreneurs. Although many CSOs continued to deliberately refuse any interaction with the current Belarusian authorities, instances of interaction on non-politically sensitive issues between organizations that legally operate in Belarus and local authorities were observed.

Belarusian CSOs also established connections with government authorities, media, and local CSOs in the countries of their relocation. According to the results of the survey on relocated CSO activities conducted by OEEC and Lawtrend, 49.1% of organizations participating in the survey reported interacting with local CSOs in their country of relocation, 21.8% interacted with the media, 18.2% with central authorities, and 12.7% with parliamentary bodies.

PUBLIC IMAGE:

5.8 (2022: 5.7)



The public image of CSOs deteriorated slightly in 2023. Normal publicity, public relations, and communication with the government and businesses were not available to the majority of CSOs in Belarus. Information about CSO activities often spread through word of mouth only.

For security reasons, CSO transparency in Belarus is close to zero. Most CSOs, including those in exile, operate discreetly, without disclosing the faces and names of their staff and volunteers, or limit their visibility to one or two public figures. Such anonymous communication impedes trust building with constituents and hampers the public credibility of CSOs.

At the same time, some CSOs in exile have restarted their public reporting efforts. For example, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, The Others, the Legal Initiative, and other CSOs distribute annual public reports on their activities. Importantly, these reports do not contain information about finances and individuals. CSOs that include financial information into their reports disseminate these reports only among their partners and donors through closed, non-public channels.

To their detriment, CSOs in Belarus face intense pressure from society to be transparent and participate in legal activities, which CSOs cannot heed due to the associated existential risks previously discussed. In contrast, GONGOs or similar state endorsed organizations are able to meet these demands much more easily. A qualitative study titled “Belarusian Attitudes towards Civic Engagement,” was conducted in 2023 among respondents currently residing in Belarus. The results of the study showed that respondents have a generally positive attitude towards “socially useful activities” (i.e., civic activities), but perceive such activities as a way to solve local problems or to provide targeted assistance to those in need, rather than opportunities to improve the situation in the country or for personal development. Most respondents had a low awareness of CSOs and did not clearly distinguish between independent organizations and GONGOs. Only a small portion of respondents mentioned having recently participated in socially useful activities such as subscribing to volunteer groups, helping stray animals, donating money or items to charity, or taking part in cleanup days called “subbotniks.” Indicating a generally low level of understanding of the civil society sector among the general population.

According to the National Poll (representing only democratic activists, but including those residing in Belarus), the respondents are well aware of many new CSOs and consider them useful. CSOs that do not reject means of non-peaceful resistance had the highest recognition. 90% of respondents knew Cyberpartisans, 81% considered them useful, ByPol (organization uniting former law enforcement officers) was known by 87% and trusted by 56%, respectively, and Belarusian Hajun (an initiative monitoring the movement of Russian military on the territory of Belarus) was known by 73% and trusted by 66%. Prominent human rights organizations that provide support to political prisoners and their families were also well-known among pro-democratic Belarusians with BYSOL and Politzek.me

among the best known and trusted CSOs.

CSOs operating in Belarus are forced to work with the state in one form or another, for example, by holding their events in state cultural and educational institutions. Here, the emerging dependence of CSOs on the state engendered by the current conditions makes it difficult to distinguish between organizations that actually do not have a problem working with the state and those that merely successfully disguise themselves as such. In such an authoritarian context, CSOs constantly face decisions about what concessions they must make to survive and how to maintain meaningful differences between themselves and GONGOs.

In 2023, the authorities continued their targeted campaign to discredit CSOs and devalue civil society more broadly through state media and propagandized Telegram channels. The FactcheckBY project, which analyzes disinformation about civil society in Belarusian state media and the Belarusian version of the Russian news agency Sputnik, recorded 91 such publications discrediting civil society in December alone. Propagandists did not deny that they were purposefully destroying CSOs, calling them “pseudo-social structures, quasi-parties, and extremist propaganda mouthpieces that brought chaos and discord into society.” Officials also admitted that the regime was now seeking to give the term “civil society” a new meaning by fostering GONGOs instead of CSOs. The content of this propaganda demonizes CSOs, was full of conspiracy theories, and spread disinformation to discredit the legitimate actions of civil society. One such conspiracy theory concerned EU support for CSOs, which was described as “interference” in the internal affairs of Belarus. State propaganda also sought to discredit politically imprisoned CSO representatives, such as Nobel laureate Ales Bialiatski, in order to undermine the representatives’ reputations and justify their persecution.

At the same time, there was no credible data indicating the wide appeal of such propaganda narratives. CSO representatives believe that such propaganda does not impress the general population outside the regime’s circle of supporters and was largely irrelevant to the politically neutral audience.

Nevertheless, the regular and widespread labeling of CSOs, their information channels, and media as “extremist” created enough fear among audiences that the label prevents them from interacting with the supposedly extremist content via subscribing, leaving likes and comments, or sharing content online. CSOs labeled “extremist,” as well as the independent media, were compelled to ask individuals in Belarus to unsubscribe from their social media pages for people’s own safety, which directly reduced CSOs’ access to their audience and undermined CSO efforts to build a positive public image.

CSOs operating from abroad ran active communication campaigns and appeared in independent media. The activities of CSOs in exile, for example, such as the Human Rights Center Viasna or the Belarusian Youth Hub, were regularly covered by exile media outlets that were recognized as extremist in Belarus.

Such media took comments from representatives of CSOs, disseminated data from CSO research, and actively published analytical documents prepared by civil society, such as materials of the Kosht Urada project. At the same time, other CSOs complained that the media ignored their agendas and activities, especially those related to social inclusion or rights of vulnerable groups.

Although individual CSOs have codes of ethics for their staff and members, there were no attempts by CSOs in 2023 to develop a general code of conduct for the whole sector.