

CIVIL SOCIETY IN BELARUS 2015-2021



FROM STABLE DEVELOPMENT
TO NEW CHALLENGES

Civil society in Belarus 2015-2021: from stable development to new challenges

Edited by:

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FROM STABLE DEVELOPMENT TO NEW CHALLENGES
БЕЛАРУССКОЕ ГРАЖДАНСКОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО 2015 -2021:
ОТ СТАБИЛЬНОГО РАЗВИТИЯ К НОВЫМ ВЫЗОВАМ

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The Editors' Preface

This collection of articles was meant initially to be an already traditional review of Belarusian civil society's condition and development in the previous period. The focus of our attention had to include the years 2015–2020 – the period rather favorable both for the third sector and for the economic and social development of Belarus as a whole. A new political “thaw” was started in 2014–2015 and lasted 5 years; despite want of structural reforms and intrinsic changes of the character of political power in the country, the economic and institutional conditions for the development of the mass media, business, civil society organizations and initiatives did improve; the quantity of the degrees of freedom did increase.

However, the hopes of some experts, as well as figures of the third sector and business, who proclaimed a possibility of the Belarusian regime's evolutionary “drift” into the democratic direction, happened to be futile. Pressure began to grow in 2019 when Russia started its “integration deepening” game, which questioned the preservation of Belarus' sovereignty. Already back then, the most sagacious analysts warned that the year 2020 – the presidential election year – would become a turning point in the further development of the country. Its role in the strengthening of this pressure was played by the Belarusian authorities' reaction to the COVID–19 pandemic – the reaction that was not essentially new, but which, however, did reveal to many Belarusians the regime's real attitude towards its citizens who used to prefer not to pay attention to the question of who and how governs them and the country.

The result of these processes was the political crisis, the biggest one during the whole time of independent Belarus' existence, which was accompanied by a high level of political mobilization throughout the election campaign, the most large-scale and long-playing street protests, and the most wide-ranging repressions against the otherwise-minded. The protest movement was suppressed; people

were killed; thousands of people happened to be imprisoned or sent into exile, to be fired or to receive the employment ban; hundreds of public organizations were liquidated; the independent mass media lost any possibility of any legal activity in the country; any activity independent of the state began to be persecuted. The country appeared in a situation of juridical default and international isolation; the law-enforcement system and adjudicatory bodies inviolately carry out repressive functions; at last – Belarus happened to be a participant of the war against Ukraine on the aggressor's side.

Today, in 2022, it is obvious that neither Belarusian third sector, nor Belarus, nor Region as a whole will ever return to the former state of affairs. The events of 2020–2021 in Belarus and the war unleashed in February 2022 in Ukraine will one way or another lead to substantial changes, at least, in Europe. However, despite the global character of these changes, we consider it necessary to describe the processes, tendencies, and achievements that took place in Belarusian society and in the field of activity of public organizations during the previous period. The majority of the achieved results were washed off by the wave of the political crisis and the subsequent repressions; however, it does not lose its value because of that, and it is one of the keys to understand the current situation.

Therefore, the first part of this collection is dedicated to subjects, processes, and tendencies in the CSOs sphere in 2015–2020. The collection was compiled in a long and difficult way; some texts it includes were written in 2020 and then they were only supplemented a tad; some articles were written already in 2021 when the flywheel of repressions began working at its highest efficiency; therefore, they can seem a little bit patchy. Some authors of the collection, activists of CSOs, researchers, and analysts were compelled to leave the country; some of those who remain in Belarus are forced to resort to pseudonyms because of a threat of prosecution. Except the analysis of the development of public organizations and initiatives in the traditional logic of thematic lines of activity (ecology, social projects, culture, national minorities, etc.), in this section, we also tried to analyze some aspects and infrastructural processes that create new conditions for CSOs development – the changes of the media environment, the development of crowdfunding practices, the nascency of new types of social movements and communities caused by digitalization processes, etc. Besides, separate attention is paid to the development of CSOs in different areas of Belarus. It has to do with the traditional for Belarus disproportion in the development of the third sector between the capital and regions, which [disproportion] began to be overcome gradually in the years prior to the political crisis of 2020, and it seems important to us to mention these processes.

The second part of the collection is dedicated to the attempt of at least partially describing and comprehending the events of 2020–2021 per se – their preconditions, characteristic, and scales. A deep and systematic analysis of these processes is yet to come; today, Belarusian researchers have obviously not enough possibilities and tools for a full-fledged description of this dynamic period. The articles in this part can be rather debatable and even provocative, but we do hope that they will offer their mite not only to the fixation, but also to the understanding and interpretation of the intricate and antilogous processes of this period in Belarusian history.

Part 1

Belarusan civil society
organizations: achievements
of 2015-2020 and losses in 2021

Chapter A

Accumulation of potential in different
thematic sectors and conditions
of civic organisations's development
in 2015-21

Interaction of Belarusian civil society and the state: advocacy possibilities (2015–2020)

Natallia Rabava

Advocacy activity is usually understood as the activity of civil society organizations, non-institutionalized initiatives, and separate citizens, which:

- is aimed at representing, defending, and promoting socially significant interests of separate social groups and society as a whole,
- is aimed at introducing changes into normative legal acts,
- presupposes direct interaction with state organs of government¹.

The presence of advocacy possibilities is one of the most important indicators of the condition of civil society in this or that country.

The analysis of the advocacy sphere in Belarus demonstrates its dependence on the character of the Belarusian authorities' attitude towards civil society, as well as the foreign policy conjuncture. The 2015–2020 period was characterized by relative liberalization in the internal and foreign policies. After the events in Ukraine in 2014, the government of Belarus intensified the development of the western vector of the foreign policy, using it, inter alia, for the pragmatic purposes of receiving financial support in the form of credits, financing of various state programs and projects, etc. Thus, one of the conditions of receiving this sort of help from international organizations and governments of other countries often was the interaction of state structures with civil society. The idea of applying “soft power” in order to advance democratic principles underlay the donor support to Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs) when the implementation of these or those projects presupposed the interaction between the public and the state.

¹ Advocacy in the Republic of Belarus: experiences of civil society organizations// http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/advokatirovanie_polnaya.pdf

Within the framework of the general-political tendency of liberalization, civil society (its non-politicized initiatives) ceased to be perceived by the authorities of different levels as a certain threat; interaction practices started to develop. These and other factors, in many respects, caused the development of the advocacy sphere in Belarus in the period of 2015–2020.

First of all, it is possible to mark a certain expansion of practices of interaction between civil society and the state (until the period of the complete collapse of all relations between CSOs and state structures as a result of the socio-political crisis in 2020). In certain cases, civil society representatives began to be included in public councils and working groups to discuss these or those questions at both regional and national levels. In particular, «in 2015, public councils aimed at working out the strategy of the sustainable development of the Brasłaŭ and Bjaroza Rajons [Districts] were created; according to a decision of the Homiel Regional Executive Committee, a working group of 14 representatives of the authorities and CSOs was created – it was aimed at early rehabilitation of people with disabilities (spinal column traumas); the share of representatives of business in the structure of the public-advisory council aimed at entrepreneurship development at the Ministry of Economics increased by 30%»². However, these measures had more likely a formal character and were implemented in the form of just informing the representatives of the public on decisions accepted by state structures. The decision to include these or those CSOs representatives in the structure of such councils was made by the authorities unilaterally and was characterized by a high degree of non-transparency. The basic way of actions of advocacy subjects in this case was to suggest variants of solving these or those problems. As a successful example within the pale of such a set of possibilities, it is possible to recall the results of the 2016 campaign «General Plan For Minsk», as a result of which in the general layout of the city of Minsk 31 out of 83 proposals from activists were accepted and 13 more offers were accepted partially³.

Thus, civil society's communication with the authorities, in the overwhelming majority of cases, still had a unilateral character. Officials did not consider it necessary to inform CSOs on the accepted decisions, completely excluding them from this process. This practice became possible because of the absence of the system legislation that regulates the process of interaction between CSOs and the state. As a rule, the decision on the creation of public councils and the regulation of civil society representatives' participation in them was accepted by state bodies

² Belarusian Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index 2015

³ Belarusian Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index 2016

themselves⁴. Thus, the presence (according to the authorities) of any connections of CSOs with the political opposition (or if the character of their activity is considered to be political) almost completely deprived such organization of a possibility of their even quasi-participation in the decision-making process in the field of state administration. Law №130–3 d/d July, 17th, 2018 «About normative legal acts» did not change at all the role of civil society in the decision-making process, although it established the directions, according to which all public discussions should obligatorily be organized, and assigned their minimum terms.

Some expansion of interaction of the state with civil society was reflected in such an indicator as the increase of the number of CSOs representatives' meetings with officials and decision-makers in the field of state administration. Some of them even took part in the actions/events organized by CSOs. Among such actions/events, it is possible to name: the forum «Expanding horizons: investments, finances, development» (on September, 29th, 2016); the 6th Festival of Informal Education (on July, 7th–9th, 2016); the October Economic Forum (organized annually in 2013–2019). The latter can be considered a successful example of advancing the ideas of effective state administration as this dialogue platform covered a wide range of stakeholders, mentioning many significant questions of the economic policy. Still, it is necessary to underline that advocacy subjects seldom tried to interact with representatives of legislative power as the latter carry out the function of formal approval of decisions of executive power that in reality defines and forms public politics in Belarus. The paradox of this situation is that the majority of purposes of advocacy campaigns is to changes the normative legal base.

The success of advocacy campaigns in Belarus, in many respects, depended on the topics and degree of its politicization. As a whole, during 2015–2020, it was possible to observe the expansion of the thematic field of advocacy, covering both national and local levels.

During the considered period, subjects of advocacy in Belarus worked, with various degrees of intensity, in the following directions:

- Human rights defending activity, protection of the rights of minorities;
- Development of the public sector, civic participation, the right to freedom of associations;
- Cultural policy and civic-educational activity;

⁴ CSO Meter. Belarus. Evaluation of conditions for civil societies in the Eastern Partnership countries. Minsk, 2019// <https://csometer.info/sites/default/files/2020-11/CSO-Meter-Country-Report-Belarus-RUS-1.pdf>

- Freedom of speech and mass media;
- Social policy, protection of the rights of people with disabilities;
- Gender rights and equality;
- Ecology, protection of animals;
- Entrepreneurial activity and business development;
- Protection of the rights of workers, trade-union activity;
- Local, regional initiatives⁵.

The business community's activities can be considered rather successful. It was in the field of the economic policy where it was possible to achieve some concessions to business on the part of the state. For example, «In the end of 2017, a package of normative legal acts aimed at improving the business environment in Belarus was accepted. The documents were developed with the active participation of business associations and with the account of several proposals and recommendations of the Public-Advisory Expert Council aimed at entrepreneurship development»⁶.

Campaigns aimed at promoting the state social service procurement, the campaign against swamp drainages, and the advocacy in the field of protection of the rights of people with disabilities, were effective as well. Thus, in autumn 2016, the Republic of Belarus ratified the Convention on the rights of the disabled (it was accepted by Resolution 61/106 of the General Assemblies on December, 13th, 2006)⁷ and the corresponding national normative legal acts were changed, which improved the situation with the rights of people of this group. As a result of joint advocacy actions of such CSOs as the Environmental Solutions Center, the public association "Ecodom", and others, Law №144-3 d/d November, 9th, 2018 «About the manufacture and treatment of organic production» was accepted.

One more example of a successful advocacy campaign (although it had no general coordination) was the movement against so-called «social parasite» Decree №3 «About the prevention of social parasitism». In the beginning of 2017, all over the country, there passed mass protests organized by CSOs, political parties and movements against Decree №3. More than 25,000 people signed on the web-site petitions by the appeal sent to organs of state administration with the demand to

⁵ Advocacy in the Republic of Belarus: experiences of civil society organizations // http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/advokatirovanie_polnaya.pdf

⁶ Belarusian Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index 2017

⁷ Convention on the rights of the disabled // https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/disability.shtml

cancel this Decree. The suspension of its action and subsequent transformation became the result of this campaign.

However, even changes in the legislation as a result of advocacy activities not always led to the expected changes in the law-enforcement practice. E.g. Decree №7 «About entrepreneurship development» d/d November, 23rd, 2017 – it was developed with the active participation of the business community and was meant to promote the liberalization of business dealing conditions. Contrary to the expectations of the public, «the private property institution was practically not strengthened; the size and functions of the state in the economy were not reduced; no real equality of conditions of managing of economic subjects; business decriminalization was postponed; the high tax burden was preserved»⁸.

At the same time, in a number of directions, the efforts of the third sector were futile. Thus, throughout all the considered period, the topic of human rights remained a taboo for the authorities. Officials' circumspection was caused even by the word combination "human rights". The field of activity of power-wielding structures remained outside the possibilities of influence on the part of the public. In particular, a number of appeals of citizens and CSOs concerning the investigation of cases of *dedovshchina* [the informal practice of hazing and abuse of junior conscripts] and infringements of human rights in the Army had no results. Here, it is also necessary to mark that the activity of some profile CSOs aimed at improving the positions of civil society in Belarus did not bring any significant results. For example, in spite of the fact that «in October 2017, 74 organizations signed the collective appeal to the state, initiated by the public association «ACT», with proposals to improve the taxation conditions for CSOs⁹», no changes followed. In this direction, the only one significant achievement was the cancellation of criminal liability for the activity on behalf of non-registered organizations (which, however, was returned in 2021).

The law on the counteraction to home violence, which project was worked out by a number of CSOs together with the corresponding ministries and departments, was not accepted¹⁰. The fight of Brest townsfolk during several years against the construction of the ecologically unsafe battery factory IPOWERR was not

⁸ Pluses and minuses of Decree №7// <https://liberty-belarus.info/ekonomika-belarusi/tendentsii/item/3952-plyusy-i-minusy-dekreta-7>

⁹ Belarusian Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index 2017

¹⁰ Belarusian Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index 2018

successful either, despite the officials' promises¹¹. The bill against the ill-treatment of animals was withdrawn, inter alia, because CSOs failed to coordinate their positions in this question¹².

At the same time, it is possible to speak of, at least, one successful case of advocacy that had to do with human rights. The public movement «Mothers 328» against the unfair sentences passed according to the antinarcotic legislation managed to achieve the mitigation of punishment (Part №2 and Part №3 of Article 328 of the Criminal Code). The changes meant the reduction of the bottom limit of punishment from five to three years of imprisonment in Part №2 and from eight to six years of imprisonment in Part №3¹³.

The advocacy sphere development is essentially influenced by the so-called «personal factor» of employees of organs of state administration – when decisions are accepted subjectively, not on the basis of normative legal acts. Thereupon, the results of advocacy campaigns become unpredictable¹⁴.

One more tendency of the advocacy sphere development was the active use of electronic tools by advocacy subjects (the web-sites like petitions.by, 115.6eA). It made the advocacy sphere more accessible to non-institutionalized initiatives and separate citizens. E.g. since the moment of the creation of the initiative «Convenient City», 600,000 people became users of the web-site petitions.by; thousands of citizens' appeals were submitted to organs of state administration, which – in total – collected more than one million signatures. Among the most mass ones as for the quantity of the collected signatures, it is possible to mention the petition «No to Decree №3 «About social parasites» – it collected more than 25,000 signatures. About 15,000 people signed the petition «Stop arbitrariness in the Army – protest against dedovshchina!». The petition created already in 2021 – «The White-Red-White Flag is not extremist!» – was signed by more than 100,000 people. However, the appeals that received the most large-scale support, as a matter of fact, were ignored by the authorities. Nevertheless, the mechanism of submitting electronic appeals was increasingly popular till the end of 2020.

The socio-political crisis of 2020 cardinally changed the character of mutual relations of civil society and the state in Belarus. As a matter of fact, the links built

¹¹ Instead of the referendum: in Brest, the battery factory is about to start its work | Belarus: as viewed from Europe – DW special project | DW | 05.03.2021 // <https://www.dw.com/ru/vmesto-referenduma-v-breste-gotovjatsja-zapustit-akkumuljatornyj-zavod/a-56776006>

¹² Belarusian Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index 2018

¹³ Belarusian Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index 2018

¹⁴ Civil society and organs of power: interaction at the local level // http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/blc_best_practices_cso-laru_0.pdf

before appeared to be completely destroyed. To carry out advocacy campaigns is almost impossible now. On the one hand, the trust to state bodies is strongly undermined because of the rigid repressions society was faced with after August 2020. Therefore, many civil society organizations refuse even to contact with officials for ethical reasons. On the other hand, officials themselves are very limited now in their actions when it comes to interactions with civil society because of the reactionary and situational policy of the country leaders. In this regard, the frameworks of interaction of organs of power and civil society became very blurry, which makes advocacy activity almost impossible.

Belarus' civil society in 2015–2020: new social movements and forms of activity

Vadim Mojeiko

Besides the protests, election, and coronavirus pandemic, the year 2020 is remembered by the Belarusians as an impressive outburst of civic movements and initiatives. However, if we look narrowly, it becomes clear that they appeared not out of the blue. During the last five years, it was possible to observe quite certain tendencies of developing new social movements and forms of activity that, as a result, became the roots of the civic mobilization in 2020.

Crowdfunding: from charity meetings to millions for solidarity foundations

Belarusian public organizations and initiatives were always faced with the acute problem of seeking for tools to finance their activity. Thus, it was absolutely impossible to count on any state support; there are no serious internal private foundations; and the official reception of any foreign aid is bureaucratized so much that there are no chances to receive it legally. Crowdfunding became the tool, thanks to which it was possible to address for help to private persons and at the expense of a considerable quantity of small donations to finance a society-important undertaking.

The state did not initially pay attention to the development of crowdfunding and did not see any threat in it because everything began with quite harmless projects – for example, the auction “MajeSens” where well-known or unknown people exchanged meetings with themselves for charitable payments. The platform “Talaka” was already closer to classical crowdfunding where everyone could raise

money for their initiatives. In April 2015, there appeared the platform “Ulej” [“Beehive”] – the first crowdfunding with its own financial infrastructure.

Since the very beginning, public initiatives used the resource of crowdfunding as a possibility not only to attract financing, but also to disseminate the information on their activity. It became especially topical in the spring of 2019 when “Beehive” launched the fundraising platform for physical persons “MolaMola”. It widened the formats of collections because crowdfunding works according to the project logic, activity presupposes a purpose that can be achieved for a certain period of time, and donations should be remunerated (e.g. by printing and distributing merchandise). With the help of “MolaMola”, it became convenient to collect donations for initiatives as a whole, for their current activity. Already for the first year of its work, “MolaMola” hosted more than one and a half thousand companies that collected more than 1.25 million BYN (about \$600 thousand). “MolaMola” was awarded by the NGOs Assembly as the Civil Society Champion in 2019 in the nomination “Best Activity of the Year”.

These processes coincided with the general development and penetration of digital technologies. Getting used to the use of bank cards and payments on the Internet, the Belarusians became more prepared to render their support to initiatives with the help of crowdfunding. Thanks to social networks and messengers, the fundraising information was spread faster.

In 2018, thanks to crowdfunding, the public campaign of celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic (#BHP100) was financed: BYN 14 thousand was brought by business, more BYN 40 thousand was brought by more than 1,000 individual donors. The research “Public organizations and initiatives of citizens: participation potential” says that donations entered the list of top-3 of the most popular forms of participation in public work¹.

On the basis of this experience, there was a boom of crowdfunding in 2020 when national records of collections were updated several times. The initiative “Fair People” collected €185 thousand, “ByCovid-19” – \$335 thousand, the foundation “BySOL” – €3,5 million. The initiative #BY_Help was launched after the mass arrests in the spring of 2017 and it collected then \$55 thousand for the families of the victims, and after the repressions in 2020 it collected more than BYN 10 million (nearly €3,3 million).

These successes, however, have an underside, too. The authorities are afraid of the local grass-roots self-organization that can be uncontrollably financed in large

¹ Crowdfunding as a way of financing public organizations and initiatives in Belarus // <http://www.infopolicy.biz/?p=12345>

scales. The crowdfunding platforms “Beehive” and “MolaMola” were destroyed, which essentially limited small public initiatives’ possibility to quickly and simply receive donations. Trying to limit the receipt of help from solidarity foundations, the authorities blocked the bank cards of the addressees of such aid. Participation in the transfer of financial help to those who suffered from the repressions was now considered the act of financing the extremist activity, which is subject to criminal prosecution. The journalist and media manager Andrei Aleksandrov became the first one who was arrested on such a charge in January 2021.

New public-political movements: mothers and youth, ecology and drugs

The agenda of the traditional oppositional political forces in Belarus does not basically change for years: fair elections, human rights, the Belarusian language, Europe as a geopolitical choice. Without belittling the importance of these topics, but with the lapse of time in society there appeared a desire to get united around and to advocate more various questions outside of these frameworks or which seemed to the political forces insignificant or inconvenient ones. For the sake of justice, we must say that the “old” parties and activists did take part in new initiatives, including at the regional level; however, the public demand generated new organizations and new leaders.

The difficult topic of drugs led to the nascency of the initiatives “Mothers 328” (condemned teenagers’ families supporting the clemency of punishments) and “Legalize Belarus” (young men advancing the decriminalization of soft psycho-active substances as a whole). Although they used various, including partially acceptable for power, advocacy methods (street actions and processions, public mass hunger-strike) and were faced with constant repressions, however they achieved some successes. For example, after the hunger-strike of “Mothers 328” in 2019, the House of Representatives made amendments to the corresponding article, mitigating punishment, and Alexander Lukashenko publicly promised personal pardons to those who are already condemned. The advancement of its agenda in society through the mass media and social networks, the formation of communities, and the revealing of problems, can be considered the success of “Legalize Belarus”.

The environmental advocacy campaign of Brest activists against the launch of the battery factory IPOWEL lasted several years. Although the regular “let the pigeons have a feed” (as a matter of fact – non-approved street protests) led to detentions, however, as a result, they forced the authorities to reckon with the

protesters. The head of Brest started to meet with citizens during open receptions in the assembly hall, and Lukashenko publicly agreed with the legitimacy of the protesters' requirements. The campaign against the battery factory became such an important part of the information agenda of Belarus that within the pale of his pre-election campaign Lukashenko went to Brest, met with the protesters, and promised them to carry out a local referendum on the factory. However, after the election, the factory was launched and started its work, and the referendum was never organized.

The fight against domestic violence became an important mobilizing topic. At first, the public association "Gender Prospects" and the campaign "Don't Be Silent! Stop Violence In Families!" struggled to accept the corresponding law, and when the law was not passed – there appeared the initiative "March, Baby". Thanks to its public actions, mass media attention, and performances on international platforms, the topic remained in the agenda, and the adoption of this law was supported by one of MPs of a new convocation of the House of Representatives. One of the founders of the campaign, Marina Korzh, achieved the discussion of the domestic violence topic at a meeting with the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and another co-founder, Svetlana Gatałskaya, shared the first place in the nomination "Civic Leader of the Year" of the NGOs Assembly award "Civil Society Champions".

Young activists of different initiatives ("Legalize Belarus", Belarusian Students Association, #учебаважне [educationismoreimportant]) created the Youth Bloc during the parliamentary election in 2019; they touched questions important for youth – education and the cancellation of obligatory appointments of students, military service, mitigation of the antinarcotic legislation.

The Youth Bloc participated in the election with the help of party "BSDH"; activists of the party "UCP" and the movement "For Freedom" participated in the Brest protests; the leaders of "March, Baby" are experienced NGO activists. Nevertheless, all these initiatives were positioned and perceived not as part of the old public-political projects, but as new progressive movements. The border between activism and politics got smeared – e.g. the Youth Bloc believed they could manage to balance on the verge of being an NGO and a political force².

In 2020, we saw already not local political initiatives aimed at concrete questions, but the general politicization of society. Politics became not an interest of a narrow group of oppositionists, but the real common cause – *res publica*.

² New generation of activists: motives and purposes// <https://nmnby.eu/news/discussions/7052.html>

It became possible to get new vivid leaders and much wider than before groups involved in politics and solidarity campaigns.

Non-liberal initiatives: against LGBT, for domestic violence, “we can repeat”

Recently, in Belarus, there were absolutely different public movements, too. With variable successes, they advanced conservative values. Thus, one of the reasons of the aforementioned failure of adopting the law “About counteraction to domestic violence” was the advocacy campaign of the organizations from the “Coordination Council of public pro-family forces of Belarus”.

One of them, the pro-life organization “Open Hearts”, actively advocates against LGBT, abortions and in vitro fertilization, first of all, among Christian communities. With the support of management of Christian churches, they collected 52 thousand signatures under the demand to introduce the law limiting LGBT propaganda among children and youth (well, unsuccessfully: the law has not been accepted).

The initiative “Immortal Regiment” worked with varied success. Although it failed to receive registration, despite several attempts and court, however, it carried out its street actions on May 9th in several cities. The peak of successes of the “Immortal Regiment” was in 2018 when the permission to carry out its rally in Minsk was received at the last minute after the actual blackmail of the authorities (as the chairman of the NGOs Coordination Council at the embassy of the Russian Federation Andrei Gerashchenko said, “the rally will be legalized by the number of people”). However, subsequently, the initiative degraded: the incidence of cities and people decreased; in 2020–2021 there were no actions of the “Immortal Regiment” at all.

Civic initiatives as responses to the crises: coronavirus, election, repressions

Within the bounds of the public-political mobilization in 2020, there was an unseen before growth of civic activity – various forms of public work were at once joined by thousands and tens of thousands of people. At first, they in large quantities joined the volunteer movement to struggle against the coronavirus, the civic initiative “ByCovid-19”. Thus, it demonstrated the NGOs’ strong potential when experienced activists (Andrei Strizhak, Anton Motolko) during the nece-

sary moment for the country on the basis of the existing competences managed to solve the most complicated problems: to collect money, to purchase and manufacture necessary protection means and medical equipment, to deliver them to physicians who need them.

Since the beginning of the political campaign, people not only joined the presidential candidates' initiative groups, but also created civic initiatives ("Fair People", "Voice", "Bison"). On the example of the campaign "Human rights defenders for free elections" it is possible to evaluate the dynamics: in 2019–240 volunteers joined it, and in 2020 – 7.5 times more: 1,800³.

Under the conditions of the mass repressions after the election, volunteer initiatives arose around jails (in Žodzina, near Okrestina): they helped relatives to search for the arrested; those who were freed were met with readiness to render them medical and psychological help, to feed them and to bring them home. The initiative "AvokadoHelp" helped to seek for lawyers and financial means to pay for their services. The information center of initiatives helping the victims, "Probono.by", besides legal aid, also helped to find employment and to re-educate, to receive medical aid, etc.

While the official federation of trade unions of Belarus only collected signatures under the petition against the introduction of EU sanctions, there appeared branch proto-trade-unions: "ByPol" (agents of national security), "White coats" (physicians), foundations of sports, medical, and cultural solidarity. 15 university associations formed the National Students Council at the updated "Belarusian Students Association".

Such an approach – to reply to a crisis with a civic initiative – for some period became a habitual thing for the Belarusians. For example, after a fire in the church in Budsłau, €100 thousand donations were collected during several days⁴, and volunteers-alpinists were engaged in the recovery work.

³ Monitoring the 2020 election: new restrictions and possibilities // <https://nmnby.eu/news/discussions/7175.html>

⁴ <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/15-05-2021-rabota-nad-vosstanovleniem-kostela-v-budslave-prodol-zhaetsya-uzhe-razobrali-chast-sgorevshej-kryshi/>

Local communities: from “it’s not my business” to thousands of local Telegram chats

Until 2020, all was difficult with the development of local communities and trust to them in Belarus. Thus, according to the research “Awareness of and inclusion in the activity of public organizations and informal initiatives in Belarus” (2018)⁵, only 14,5% of the Belarusians knew about regional development organizations and initiatives of local communities – less than about any other NGOs. Only 6,4% was ready to give them a part of taxes (the worse result only belongs to trade unions). The Belarusians thought that local problems of a local community should be solved equally by inhabitants, administration of the District, and municipal housing committee offices (about 44% of voices per each variant), but they understood these “inhabitants” as someone else: the variant “personally I” was four times less popular (11%).

However, the year 2020 pushed the Belarusians to get united, including on a territorial basis: at first – to vote and observe at one ballot station, and then to go together to the protest marches. It led to courtyard tea drinking, holidays, festivals, performances of musicians, etc. “Flying University” coordinated lectures for local communities – from history and politics to economy and physics. The “Initiative KOTOC” was launched to create the legal joint bodies of territorial public self-rule on the basis of the already developed courtyard collectives. Local communities created their own flags of white-red-white colors – in some cases people had a voting procedure to choose their flag: with urns and the final protocol.

In September 2020, there appeared the initiative *dze.chat* – interactive maps of local Telegram chats of courtyards, districts, cities, and diasporas, which made it possible not only to find one’s own chat, but also to estimate the scale of new local communities. At various times, the map united up to 1,000 chats, and it is far from being the complete list. The authorities got frightened of this local grass-roots self-organization and began to consider the administering of local chats to be a crime; many administrators preferred to hide their chats from the visible field or not to make them visible a priori. The information on local chats now can be spread via old-school communication channels – from leaflets to word of mouth.

⁵ <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2017/01/10/issledovanie-26-oproshennyh-belorusov-neznayut-o-suschestvovanii-obschestvennyh-organizatsiy-i-initsiativ.html>

The diversity of civic initiatives developed in 2015–2020 attests to the fact that Belarusian civil society was developing intensively enough even in the adverse conditions of the last years. In the total absence of any state support, the need of collective actions and the development of contemporary communication means pushed the Belarusians to new forms of activity. The growth of social movements as a response to any topical problems became during these years a trend in the evolution of Belarusian society and notably defined the character and scale of the political mobilization in 2020.

The Belarusian mass media: follow the audience and leave for the Internet

Pauluk Bykouski

The changes in the mass media landscape of Belarus in 2015–2020 were influenced by a number of factors – both internal for the mass media sector and external ones caused by the political crisis and the ruling regime’s reaction to it. As a result, it is possible to speak about a deep aggravation of the situation for all representatives of the non-state mass media in 2020, which essentially reduces the possibilities of journalists’ work and the access of the population of Belarus to alternative sources of information.

Changes of media consumption and consequences for the mass media

Among the internal factors, there is a change of media consumption, i.e. transition from the use of mainly traditional media (TV, radio, the press) to digital platforms (web-sites, social networks, messengers). With the increase of the total number of the population and the share of those who were born after 1980, the structure of media consumption in Belarus is changing; the generation of “digital natives” in Belarus already raises children, but has not mastered the skill of using the traditional mass media. Media had to adapt to it. Many of them became multi-platform. Still, at the same time, the editorial content for social networks and messengers in a number of cases assimilated to the native content created by bloggers, which sometimes led to a decrease of editorial standards in the representation of the traditional mass media on the new platforms (comments were mixed with news, conjectures were presented as facts, etc.). According to

a sociological research of features of the functioning of the national information field, carried out by the Center of Sociological and Political Studies of Belarusian State University in 2019, the most demanded channels of receiving the information on public-political themes are television (50,2%) and Internet resources (48,1%).

Table 1. Distribution of answers to the question: "What sources do you usually address when you want to receive the information on topics?" (%)

Information sources	Topics			
	Politics	Economy	Cultural life	Ecology
Newspapers	17,9	16,6	15,9	13,8
Radio	5,3	4,5	7,5	4,6
Television	50,2	49,4	47,3	44,9
Internet (sites, news portals)	48,1	49,2	45,5	48,2
Internet (social networks)	9,2	8,4	16,4	11,9

The authors of the research arrive at the conclusion that if earlier, for a long time, television had been the dominating source of information for the Belarusian audience, then – in 2019 – television and the Internet were on equal terms. The traditional mass media preserve their positions thanks to representatives of middle-age and senior groups of the population.

Table 2. Distribution of answers to the question: "What sources do you usually address when you want to receive the information on topics?" as for age groups (%)

Information sources	Age, y.o.			
	18-19	30-44	45-59	60+
Newspapers	5,7	8,3	19,7	36,8
Radio	1,7	3,2	6,1	9,9
Television	22,2	43,1	57,6	75,1
Internet (sites, news portals)	74,8	64,8	42,8	12,6
Internet (social networks)	21,7	9,1	6,1	1,2

Financial viability

In 2014, there ended the “Belarusian economic miracle”, when the basic vector of the economy was aimed at the growth and – with certain fluctuations – but the population’s incomes grew. In 2015–2016, Belarus’ gross national product was falling, and in 2017 there began a regenerative growth of the economy that came to an end in the first half of 2019. The capacity of the advertising market in 2019 grew by 12,3% and, according to the Advertising Agencies Association, reached 225,9 million BYN (about 107,3 million USD), which actually meant the returning to the indicator of 2008 with another cross-sector section. During this period, printed editions started to lose considerably their incomes from subscriptions, and the advertising budget was redistributed to the advantage of the Internet and television. In 2019, for the first time, the expenses on advertising on the Internet bypassed as for the volume the advertising on television. In 2020, the capacity of the Belarusian advertising market decreased, according to the AAA, to 216,4 million BYN (about 83,8 million USD) with the preservation of the growth of expenses on Internet advertising. The mass media presented on the Internet compete for the attention of the audience and for the advertising money with Internet services, social networks and individual popular bloggers and entertaining projects on YouTube.

In 2015–2020, many editions did not have enough means for core expenses (premises payment, printing, paper, salaries of employees). It particularly concerned the printed mass media, which – with rare exceptions – lost their circulations, quantity of pages, and employees who left because of the decrease of their wages.

Irregularity of studying the audience

In Belarus, during this period, there are no regular sociological polls of the audience of the whole media sector, but there are regular polls of such segments as television and radio, as well as the company Gemius’ online study of the audience of web-sites (which can be accessed on request; its fragments are published openly). The latest poll of the media sector carried out by independent sociologists took place in 2015 (SATIO research commissioned by Internews in 2015. Research was conducted in 2015 by face to face interviews (respondents of 18 and older, living in cities). In 2019, the report on the sociological poll of the audience of the media sector, which in 2017–2019 was carried out by the Informational Analytical Center at the Administration of the President of Belarus (IAC), was published. In April 2019, the IAC was liquidated. In 2019, the Ministry of Information ordered the Center of Sociological and Political Studies

of Belarusian State University to carry out a sociological research of peculiarities of the functioning of the national information field.

Restriction of journalists' activity and its consequences

Among the external factors that affect the media environment in Belarus, there are regular crackdowns before, during, and after the electoral campaigns. In 2015 – the presidential election, in 2017 – local elections, and in 2019 – parliamentary elections were carried out in a priori non-competitive conditions, without intrigue, and without society's interest. They were accompanied by pinpoint repressions and a change of the media legislation (more – below).

Belarus entered the 2020 presidential election against the backdrop of the deep political crisis and the peak of the unpopularity of President Alexander Lukashenko. Society was awakening; the mass audience became interested in the political sphere. The non-state Belarusian and foreign mass media that work for the Belarusian audience were actively covering the election process, street actions, wrote about the mass detentions of protesters and the beatings of arrested persons, and gave a platform to the ex-candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya who did not recognize the official results of the election announced by the Central Electoral Committee and who is believed to have won during this election by numerous opponents of the current regime. In reply, the ruling regime passed from pinpoint repressions (“the BELTA case”, prosecutions of journalists who work for the foreign mass media without accreditations from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus) to systematic repressions – journalists are being detained during unapproved actions even if they have the journalist certificate, the editorial task and the words “The Press” on their clothes; all Belarusian citizens who work for the foreign mass media are deprived of accreditations from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and, accordingly, have received an interdiction to work in Belarus as foreign correspondents; journalists are now brought not only to administrative, but also criminal responsibility for their professional work; a number of web-sites of the independent mass media have been blocked for the Belarusian audience.

In 2020, the restrictions of journalists' possibilities of being present at street protest actions naturally led to the situation when editions started to use the content created by users (UGC, user-generated content) instead of photos and videos made by professional equipment and professional journalists. Editions mastered the skills of monitoring the UGC, sorting and checking the content sent by anonymous users. There were several attempts to deceive editions and to provide them with the fake content.

The restriction of access to the web-sites uncontrollable by the Belarusian state during several days after the election on August, 9th, 2020 forced a number of the mass media to open their channels on Telegram and to place there their complete materials because this messenger was accessible, at least in a text mode. In its turn, it accustomed the audience to read the news not on the web-sites, but on Telegram.

The most popular Internet resource in Belarus – Tut.by – since October, 1st, by the order of the Ministry of Information, was deprived of the status of mass media for three months. On December, 3rd, 2020, the Economic Court of Minsk, by the appeal of the Ministry of Information, deprived this portal of the status of mass media completely. The edition of Tut.by continued their work and founded the project “Zerkalo”.

Legislation changes

There were changes in the Law “About the mass media” accepted on December, 20th, 2014, on May, 11th, 2016, and on July, 17th, 2018. The Law “About the mass media” now says that there is the responsibility of the owners of web-sites for the distribution of statements of visitors; it was introduced in 2015. Many publishers disconnected comments as they have no spare money to monitor all the comments.

Registration of the Internet mass media. Since December, 1st, 2018, there are amendments to the Law “About the mass media” that introduce such a new concept as “the Internet edition”, i.e. an Internet resource that has passed the state registration. It is interesting that an Internet resource that is not registered as an “Internet edition” is not considered to be mass media. The non-registered Internet resources have the duties of the mass media, but not the rights of the mass media; the status of mass media will cover only those whom the state will allow to have this status. In 2019, the Ministry of Information registered 20 web-sites as “Internet editions” (14 state-run and 6 non-state ones).

Interdiction of anonymous comments. One more innovation is the interdiction of anonymous comments since December, 1st, 2018. The Law says, “Not to allow the placing on an Internet resource, an Internet edition of information and (or) materials (including comments) by other users without their preliminary identification”. On November, 23rd, 2018, the Council of Ministers of Belarus accepted Decision №850 “To pass the Provision on the order of the preliminary identification of users of an Internet resource, an Internet edition”. In conformity with the statutory act, “The owner of the Internet resource carries out the

activation of the account of the user by sending the activation code via SMS to the user's mobile phone number submitted when the user filled the terms of service or with the use of other identification data and technical means that make it possible to identify the person of the user. Thus, one number of a mobile phone and (or) one complete set of other identification data can be used for the registration of no more than one account of the user on each concrete Internet resource."

Since October 2014, at the Ministry of Information of Belarus, there works the National Commission of Experts, which task is to evaluate information production as for the presence (absence) of signs displaying extremism in it. According to the last accessible data, as of October, 1st, 2019, this Commission conducted research of 1,900 items of information production and found the presence of signs displaying extremism (the stirring-up of racial, national, or religious hatred or rancor, supremacy propaganda, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their attitude to one's racial, national, religious belonging, propaganda and public demonstration of national symbolics or attributes) in 591 of them. The Ministry of Information has a national list of extremist materials – as of December, 31st, 2020 it includes 172 positions (information production, printed editions, books, brochures, literary works, videos, song lyrics, CDs). One of examples of the activity of this Commission in 2018 was the so-called "Regnum case" (the Minsk Court recognized three Belarusian authors of the agency Regnum guilty of the stirring-up of national enmity and gave them 5 years of deprivation of freedom with suspended execution of sentence).

Statistics on the registration of the mass media

As of November, 1st, 2020, in Belarus, 1628 printed mass media (722 newspapers, 865 magazines, 31 bulletins, 8 catalogs, 2 almanacs) are registered; out of them: state-run – 438 (214 newspapers, 213 magazines, 11 bulletins), non-state – 1190 (508 newspapers, 652 magazines, 20 bulletins, 8 catalogs, 2 almanacs). Among these mass media – 136 state-run regional printed mass media, which founders are regional, city, and district executive committees (118 district, 9 regional, 9 city ones). In the segment of the mass political mass media, the state-run press dominates: the general single circulation of the leading national mass political newspapers is 263,700 copies, the state-run regional press – 636,500 copies (including district newspapers – 482,000 copies, regional newspapers – 154,500 copies). On the territory of Belarus, there are about 3,000 foreign printed mass-media, more than 80% of which are Russian.

As of November, 1st, 2020, in Belarus, 261 tele-radio-broadcasting mass media are registered (out of them: 180 – state-run and 81 – non-state ones); various thematic orientations. In Belarus, there work 98 national television mass media; out of them: 44 – state-run, including 10 national TV programs: “Belarus 1”, “Belarus 2”, “Belarus 3”, “Belarus 5”, “Belarus 5 Internet”, “Belarus 24”, and “NTV Belarus” (the founder – the Belarusian TV and Radio Company); “National Television” (ONT, the founder – the joint-stock company “Second National TV channel”); “Capital Television” (STV), and “Russia-Belarus” (the founder – the joint-stock company “Capital Television”).

As of November, 1st, 2020, in Belarus, 163 radio programs are registered. Out of them: state-run – 136, non-state – 27. 64 radio programs work in the FM range.

Crowdfunding in Belarus: fast development and state of the art

Maryla Hilica

The year 2011 is considered to be the beginning of crowdfunding in Belarus – that was when the first fundraising platform “Maesens” appeared: it was an auction where it was possible to receive a meeting aimed at supporting charity projects. Two years later, “Talaka”, an online platform aimed at searching for a team of adherents in order to implement their own ideas, was created. Almost at the same time, there appeared “Ulej”, a new crowdfunding platform that was aimed more at business projects, rather than at social and charitable campaigns. In 2018, the online magazine “IMENA”, which wrote about social problems in Belarus, started to function as a fundraising platform, too, and organized numerous fundraising campaigns in order to solve these problems. At last, in 2019, there appeared “MolaMola”, a sub-platform of “Ulej”, thanks to which it was possible to promptly raise funds for necessary projects or to solve public problems.

For a rather long period of time, the crowdfunding sphere in Belarus was not regulated legislatively. Participants of crowdfunding relations had to be guided by the general norms of civil legislation. They could conclude gift/donation agreements, sponsor support agreements, loan or purchase-and-sale agreements¹. Thus, the basic types of Belarusian crowdfunding developed as campaigns on the basis of charitable, free donations or on the basis of sponsor support to a project in exchange for a certain product (a book, a ticket to a concert, a CD, a game,

¹ Types of crowdfunding/“Belorusy i rynok” – 30.01.22: <https://belmarket.by/news/2019/08/06/news-40381.html>

clothes, etc.). To implement the type of “crowdfunding investment” per se was not allowed by the law².

In November 2021, Decree №196 “About online loan services and leasing activity” came into force; it was accepted with the purpose of regulating the crowdfunding sphere. According to it, the organizations that were included in a special register of the National Bank (it has to supervise the crowdfunding sphere in Belarus) can only be crowdfunding platforms. The decree came into force rather recently, and right now it is difficult to find experts’ opinions and evaluations on how the Decree affects the development of crowdfunding in the country.

Charity, culture, and education were the basic directions of Belarusian crowdfunding before 2020. For example, a considerable part of cultural campaigns is translations and publications of books, a lot of which are in the Belarusian language. Charity projects are often started in order to help a social group and to solve social problems that are not solved properly at the state level. Quite often are campaigns launched by well-known persons and figures. Innovative technological projects have not become very popular on Belarusian crowdfunding platforms. There is an opinion that the Belarusians appreciate more practical and socially considerable projects³.

It is necessary to mention the role of Belarusian crowdfunding during the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. The state policy and measures against the coronavirus were questionable, and in the spring of 2020 there appeared active campaigns aimed at collecting means to help physicians, public health services establishments, and vulnerable social groups. During three months, the largest initiative, ByCovid19, collected about 360,000 dollars. Also, it is necessary to mark the mobilization effect of these campaigns: the Belarusians united in the solution of this large-scale problem⁴.

At present, out of all crowdfunding platforms in Belarus, there is only “Talaka” left. Since June 2020, “Ulej” and “MolaMola” lost a possibility to work. In July

² Who the Belarusians are ready to give their money to: Talaka about the crowdfunding market// probusiness.io – 26.01.22: <https://probusiness.io/opinion/5503-vot-komu-belorusy-gotovy-ot-davat-svoi-dengi-talaka-o-rynke-kraudfandinga.html>

³ Who the Belarusians are ready to give their money to: Talaka about the crowdfunding market// probusiness.io – 26.01.22: <https://probusiness.io/opinion/5503-vot-komu-belorusy-gotovy-ot-davat-svoi-dengi-talaka-o-rynke-kraudfandinga.html>

⁴ The influence of the campaigns and initiatives during the first wave of COVID-19 and of such a phenomenon as crowdfunding in general on the changes in the character of Belarusian society is mentioned quite often by experts.

2021, during the wave of liquidation of civil society organizations in Belarus, the authorities made a decision to liquidate the platform “IMENA”. In 2020, there appeared several considerable initiatives that help victims of the repressions: “BY_Help”, “BYSOL”, and special foundations that support physicians, sports people, and cultural figures. Until today, they collect means and help Belarusans in need while the political crisis in Belarus has not been solved.

We shall describe in brief the development of the basic crowdfunding platforms and campaigns recently.

Talaka

“Talaka”⁵ was started in Belarus in 2013. In the beginning, it was an online platform, with the help of which it was only possible to find a team and adherents in order to implement ideas and projects. Two years later, in 2015, “Talaka” introduced a possibility to collect means in order to implement projects through its specially started online service “Talakosht”.

It is important to underline that “Talaka” is not only a platform to raise money, but also a community of active people. More than 53,000 people are registered on the web-site; they specified their skills and are ready to help projects in the performance of concrete tasks. Authors of projects, in their turn, can contact the necessary experts and offer them to participate. The founder of the platform Jaŭhien Kliševič saw in it the difference between “Talaka” and, for example, the well-known platform “Kickstarter”⁶.

The table below demonstrates the topics of projects on “Talaka” (ongoing and completed ones, with and without raising money):

- Travel, tourism – 233 (7,4%)
- Health, sports – 262 (8,3%)
- City, ecology – 317 (10,0%)
- Entrepreneurship – 319 (10,1%)
- Science, education – 415 (13,1%)
- Culture, art – 679 (21,5%)
- Social support – 489 (15,5%)
- Family, children – 443 (14,0%).

⁵ The word “talaka” in the Belarusian and other Slavic languages means an old national tradition of people’s collective help to someone.

⁶ What the “talaka principle” is // “Naša Niva” – 19.01.22: <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=139433>

More than half of all projects are cultural, charitable, and educational projects. Such tendencies of the Belarusian crowdfunding platforms were noticed and marked many times by their founders and experts^{7,8}.

Today, on the platform “Talaka”, there are 2,455 active projects, out of them – 621 campaigns that raise money⁹. For all the time of existence of the platform, not less than 1,436,782 Belarusian roubles have been collected. Here are several most vivid and important projects: support to the popular courses of the Belarusian language “Language Anew” [“Mova Nanova”], the first in Belarus monument to Tadevuš Kaściuška [Thaddeus Kosciuszko], the restoration of the observatory of the Minsk Planetarium, the organization of a large-scale holiday dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic [1918], support to the private football club “Ravens” [“Krumkačy”], support to the magazine “IMENA”. The latter became the biggest money raising project in Belarus as of 2017 (21,526 Belarusian roubles or 10,700 dollars were collected).

The platform “Talaka” still works today – unlike other crowdfunding platforms in Belarus, about which we are going to speak below.

Ulej

The crowdfunding platform “Ulej” [“Beehive”] started its work in April 2015. The initiator of its creation was Eduard Babariko. The partner in the sphere of receiving transfers from physical persons was Belgazprombank.

Unlike other crowdfunding platforms, “Ulej” was originally aimed at not charitable or social projects, but at business that is engaged in the manufacturing of new products in the spheres b2c. The advantage of the platform was seen in the possibility for business to safely test its product and, in case of success, to start manufacturing it.

According to the founders, every third project on “Ulej” was successful, and among literary projects the necessary (or bigger) sum was collected by 60% of projects¹⁰. The average check of implemented projects was 4,000–5,000 Bela-

⁷ Who the Belarusians are ready to give their money to: Talaka about the crowdfunding market// probusiness.io – 26.01.22: <https://probusiness.io/opinion/5503-vot-komu-belorusy-gotovy-otdavati-svoi-dengi-talaka-o-rynke-kraudfandinga.html>

⁸ It is necessary to take into consideration that the figure inside the sector means the number of projects that belong to this category as well, but not only to it. It is caused by the parameters of the web-site that makes it possible to distribute projects among several categories simultaneously.

⁹ Data of www.talaka.org

¹⁰ Crowdfunding in Belarus: How and thanks to what it works// myfin.by – 25.01.22: <https://myfin.by/stati/view/10296-kraudfanding-v-belarusi-kak-i-blagodarya-chemu-eto-rabotaet>

rusan roubles¹¹, and the Belarusians' average donations were 30–40 Belarusian roubles.

“Our experience shows precisely that the Belarusians are ready most of all to finance projects in the sphere of music, literature, and art, as well as projects of social character. It seems to me that it happens first of all because there is the physical (material) result: it is possible to listen to an album, to receive a new book, or to go to the first performance to the theater”¹², says Olga Mzhelskaya, the PR manager of “Ulej”.

In total, during the years of its work (2015–2020), “Ulej” launched 951 projects, 357 (≈37,5%) projects ended successfully and were implemented. Also, it is interesting that among them: 112 published books, the majority – in the Belarusian language, 37 events all across the country, 29 design products, 29 digital media of entertaining content, 29 musical albums and videoclips, 20 films and performances¹³. A number of projects implemented on “Ulej” turned into businesses.

On 11 June 2020, the functioning of “Ulej” and “MolaMola” (we shall speak about it below) was stopped in connection with the blocking of the accounts of the campaign by their partner – Belgazprombank¹⁴.

MolamMola

The sub-platform of the platform “Ulej”, “MolaMola”, appeared in March 2019. It was founded by public activist Anton Motolko and Eduard Babariko. The partner was Belgazprombank.

For all that time (about 15 months), the platform launched about 2,000 campaigns, about 550 projects were completed. It is necessary to underline the numerous projects that appeared in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The existence of the platform “MolaMola” played a big role in the possibility to implement money raising projects aimed at rendering aid to physicians, establish-

¹¹ Information as of 2018.

¹² People's start-up // 34mag.net – 25.01.22: <https://34mag.net/ru/post/narodny-startap>

¹³ Information from a post on Facebook «Ulej» – 26.01.22: <https://www.facebook.com/ulejby/posts/2546294032297649>

¹⁴ It may have to do with a criminal case against the bank and the fact that the founder of the platform is Eduard Babariko, the son of the presidential candidate Viktor Babariko. Belgazprombank blocked the accounts of the crowdfunding platforms MolaMola and Ulej // “Euroradio” – 29.01.22: <https://euroradio.fm/ru/belgazprombank-zablokiroval-scheta-kraudfandingovyyh-platform-mola-mola-i-ulej>

ments of public health services, etc. It was “MolaMola” where the basic anti-Covid initiative “ByCovid19” collected means.

In the summer of 2020, the platform founders launched “MolaMola” in Ukraine. They also said that they were searching for variants of renewing the work of the platform in Belarus¹⁵.

IMENA

“IMENA” is a noncommercial charitable media platform that speaks about social problems that exist in Belarus and collects means for public organizations that solve these problems.

The platform appeared on April, 11th, 2016 as an online magazine. Since 2018, it began to function as a foundation as well, with two charitable accounts: to help social projects and to support the platform itself.

The purpose of the platform is to develop the social infrastructure of Belarus. Thus, the task is not to render monetary help to a separate person, but to financially support noncommercial projects and public institutions that help many people and solve concrete public problems.

During its existence, the project “IMENA” collected about 7,000,000 Belarusian roubles, started about 40 projects, and helped more than 47,000 people. As a rule, projects on the platform collect from several tens to almost 300,000 Belarusian roubles.

The directions of projects on the platform “IMENA” are as follows:

- Help to children;
- Help to people with genetic diseases;
- Support to women who suffer from home violence;
- Support to homeless people;
- Help to people with mental diseases, their relatives, and other directions.

Among the biggest collections, it is necessary to mention the project “Nurse Instead Mother” that collected more than 633,000 Belarusian roubles. The project is aimed at helping and caring of kids-orphans, which is carried out by social nurses employed thanks to the collected means. According to the information on the platform web-site, until 2015 in hospitals in Belarus there was no position for such specialists.

¹⁵ Mola Mola is launched in Ukraine // dev.by – 20.01.22: <https://dev.by/news/mola-mola-ukraine>

During the coronavirus pandemic, the platform “IMENA” implemented a number of projects of help (“Help to medical workers in the struggle against COVID-19”, ““Good Telephone” for senior people during the coronavirus”, “Protection means for teachers during the coronavirus”) and took part in the joint campaign with “ByCovid19”.

After the events in August 2020, “IMENA” launched a project to help the victims who suffered during the peaceful rallies. Treatment and rehabilitation in clinics, medical researches, operations, acquisition of medical equipment, psychotherapeutic treatment – all that was given to the victims within the framework of the project. The campaign collected a big sum – more than 1,109,000 Belarusian roubles.

In July 2021, during the wave of liquidations of several hundreds of civil society organizations in Belarus, the Minsk City Executive Committee decided to liquidate the platform “Imena”. Since then, the platform has been frozen; its accounts are arrested. The founder of the platform said that this situation affected most of all the projects, for which “Imena” was the only one or the basic source of financing¹⁶.

Initiatives that appeared due to the political crisis in 2020

BY_help

The public initiative “BY_help” appeared back in March 2017 on the wave of the mass arrests after the protests against the so-called “Decree on social parasites”. Then, the money raising project aimed at helping victims’ families was started by the human rights defender and civil activist Andrej Stryżak together with Alaksiej Lavončyk and Julija Daraškievič.

With the increase of the political crisis in 2020, “BY_help” began to render financial help to the people who were fined or arrested for their participation in the protest actions aimed at supporting the independence of Belarus.

Since June 2020, the initiative helps victims of the repressions during the election campaign and as a result of the events after the presidential election. The help of the initiative includes: payment of penalties and indemnification for the days under arrests, one-time indemnifications on treatment and rehabilitation of

¹⁶ The Belarusian authorities close “Imena”, thus depriving thousands of Belarusians of help// dw.com – 20.01.22: <https://www.dw.com/ru/vlasti-belarusi-zakryvajut-imena-lishaja-pomoshhi-tysjachi-belorusov/a-58757680>

civilian persons who suffered during crackdowns of the protests and during detentions, payments to families of those who were killed during the protests or arrested persons in prisons, fees of lawyers¹⁷. For 15 months of its work, the initiative collected more than 12,000,000 Belarusian roubles; help was received by 12,500¹⁸.

In the first half of September, 2020, the initiative “BY_help” started a separate campaign to support the independent mass media and journalists who suffered from the repressions, “Media Solidarity Belarus Campaign”. The collected money is spent on defense means for journalists, grants and help to journalists in need, temporary relocation, to support editions that search for new legal sources of incomes in the conditions of pressure and restrictions on the part of the state¹⁹. As for the scale of the campaign, it is possible to see the statistical data for the first 12 months of its activity: more than 488,000 euros were collected, 144 relocation applications were supported (the most popular item), 65 journalists were provided with grants, and 61 mass media editions received aid²⁰.

On December, 14th 2021, the decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs recognized the initiative “BY_help”, as well as “Media Solidarity Belarus Campaign”, as extremist formations, and their activity on the territory of Belarus was forbidden. The leaders of “BY_help” said that they would continue their work.

BYSOL

The solidarity foundation “BYSOL” was created in the middle of August, 2020, in order to support and help those who were fired on political grounds and those who were compelled to leave the country, as well as to help the structures that organized political strikes in Belarus. The head of the foundation is the co-founder of “BY_help” Andrej Stryżak.

The web-site “BYSOL” says that during the year 2020 the foundation paid 2,900,000 euros. In 2021, except for its basic directions, the foundation spent more than 17,000 euros for payments to veterans on May, 9th, as well as more than 11,000 euros to help children, whose parents are political prisoners, to prepare for school.

¹⁷ Information from the web-site «BY_help» – 24.01.22: <https://www.belarus97.pro>

¹⁸ Facebook page «BY_help» – 25.01.22: <https://www.facebook.com/BYhelpBY>

¹⁹ Information from the web-site «Media Solidarity Belarus Campaign» – 24.01.22: <https://sites.google.com/belarus97.pro/media/home>

²⁰ Information from Facebook page «Media Solidarity Belarus Campaign» – 25.01.22: <https://www.facebook.com/mediasolidarity/posts/365009975342531>

The foundation defines its basic directions: to support local communities' initiatives (actions, symbolics, training, etc.); financial support to families of political prisoners; urgent evacuation of figurants of criminal cases to safe places; conversion training and employment of those who were fired on political grounds, as well as personal help to the victims of the repressions.

The basic source of the foundation is monetary donations from people in Belarus, from Belarusians abroad, and non-indifferent citizens of other countries.

The head of "BYSOL" said in one of his interviews that the most peak of applications crying for help was in August-November 2020²¹.

Speaking about the scales of monetary collections, it is possible to say that for the first four and a half months of work the foundation collected about 3,300,000 euros²².

Also, it is necessary to add that in 2020–2021 there appeared specialized foundations of solidarity: "Belarusan foundation of cultural solidarity" ("Belarusan Council of Culture")²³, "Belarusan foundation of sports solidarity"²⁴, "Foundation of medical solidarity of Belarus"²⁵. One of the most vivid projects of the latter is the creation of the platform of medical online consultations "E-health" (together with the initiative "Voice"²⁶) to help the Belarusians during the difficult political and epidemiological situation in the country. The foundations are in communication with "BYSOL".

²¹ Andrej Stryżak: «Campaigns BySol and Byhelp together gave people about 7 million euros» // «Radio Liberty» – 26.01.22: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31551031.html>

²² Information from the web-site «BYSOL» – 20.01.22: <https://bysol.org/be/about/stats>

²³ Information from Facebook page «Belarusan Council of Culture» – 25.01.22: <https://www.facebook.com/bcsfbel>

²⁴ Information from the web-site «Belarusan foundation of sports solidarity» – 25.01.22: <https://bssf.team/%20>

²⁵ Information from the web-site «Foundation of medical solidarity of Belarus» – 25.01.22: <https://bymedsol.org>

²⁶ Web-site of the platform "Voice" – 26.01.22: <https://belarus2020.org/home>

The role of pro-Russian public organizations in Belarus

Tatsiana Chulitskaya

Russia's influence on civil societies in the former Soviet republics is in the center of attention of many politicians, journalists, and researchers. A number of research papers by foreign authors (Kłysiński & Żochowski 2016; Lutsevych 2016; Mazepus et al. 2021), as well as research centers connected with Belarus (in particular – iSANS), analyze the topic of the Russian influence inside Belarus.

With certain differences in the foci of their researches, the majority of them are in agreement that one of the main subjects, which inculcates Russia's interests in Belarus, is the institution of the Orthodox Church (iSANS 2019; Kłysiński and Żochowski 2016). The Byelorussian Orthodox Church (BOC) is institutionally subordinated to and is part of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Considerable attention in such researches is also paid to organizations that are institutionally connected with Russia (by means of the support they receive directly from the Russian embassy, Rossotrudnichestvo (Federal Agency for the CIS Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), etc.) or that openly declare their pro-Russian orientation and identity (e.g. the Cossacks; the movement "Soyuz" ["Union"] that later transformed into a party; etc.). At the same time, the degree of real influence on and support of these organizations by Belarusian society remains poorly studied.

This review material is based on the research of the influence of external actors (the EU and Russia) on the situation in Belarus and Ukraine carried out within the framework of the project EU-STRAT¹. In this research, initiatives, in which the Russian influence and presence are most obvious, have been studied.

¹ And the article "Civil society and external actors: how linkages with the EU and Russia interact with socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine, East European Politics" by Mazepus et al. (2021) published as a results of the research in the magazine "East European Politics".

Substantial/ideological grounds of activity of pro-Russian organizations in Belarus

As for substantial grounds, the organizations connected with Russia (hereinafter – pro-Russian ones²) are focused on the joint history and traditional identity that are connected by the common language and culture. In general, they are based on the glorification of the past, traditional values, and preservation of the existing (non-democratic) status quo in Belarus, which is – in many respects – caused by Belarus' close ties with Russia. Often are these substantial bases built on the opposition to the idea of “The West.”

From Russia's positions, Belarus and the events taking place in it are considered in the concept of the notion «ближнее зарубежье» [“near-abroad countries”], thereby underlining the commonality of geographical, ideological-axiological, and cultural links. One of important concepts here is the concept of the «русский мир» [«Russian World»]. It reflects Russia's ambitions of extending its influence at the regional and global levels, as well as its claims to influence and participate in the solution of any questions that have to do with this “near-abroad” region. The «Russian World» concept also presupposes that Russia must be seen as a self-sufficient civilization that lost about 25 million of its (Russian-speaking) compatriots after the disintegration of the USSR. These people, within the pale of such a political approach, need support and even protection as the need arises³. Close to this concept is the narrative of the «(East) Slavic Oneness». Such a “unity” advances the idea of the preconditioned and “natural” oneness of the Russians, the Ukrainians, and the Belarusians, while the latter two are not considered independent nations at all (Fedor et al. 2017; Mazepus et al. 2021).

Along with these «big narratives», we can say that in case of Belarus Russia provides its influence by promoting the more heavy-footed, pragmatic purposes of the further integration in the political and economic spheres within the bounds of the project of the Union State and the other integration projects advanced by Russia (in particular, the Eurasian Economic Union).

Mechanisms of influence and pro-Russian organizations in Belarus

The most obvious from the point of view of defining the Russian influence are the organizations, created in the region as a whole and in Belarus in particular, with the direct support of the Russian government, embassies, or agencies. Among the

² Although the title “pro-Russian” per se is sui generis simplification.

³ Such ideological grounds were used, in particular, during Russia's occupation of Crimea.

latter, the most influential is the Rossotrudnichestvo (Federal Agency for the CIS Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), the foundation “Russian World”, and the Public Democracy Support Foundation named after Gorchakov (Hudson 2017; Lutsevych 2016; Saari 2014; Mazepus et al. 2021).

In Belarus, these “agents of the Russian world” (Lutsevych 2016) work with their partners and the organizations connected with them. One of the structural centers that is focused on the work with the Russian Diaspora is the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots (KCOPC) in Belarus that functions on the basis of the Russian Embassy (Kłysiński & Żochowski 2016). In Belarus, Rossotrudnichestvo has three centers in Minsk, Brest, and Homiel, which basic lines of activity are: interaction with compatriots, culture and art, researches and education, language, public diplomacy, etc. the foundation “Russian World” has its office at Brest State University since 2014. Besides, in Minsk, there is the Moscow center of international cooperation – the “Moscow House” – it belongs to Russia and, according to some researchers (Kłysiński & Żochowski 2016), plays the role of an informal coordination center of pro-Russian organizations in Belarus.

Thus (except for the BOC), Belarusian authoritarian power does not support (pro-)Russian initiatives and institutions that directly come or are borrowed from Russia, or have the purpose of advancing Russia’s influence at the political level. For example, in Belarus, the initiative “Immortal Regiment”⁴ failed to get registered as a public organization, and the Belarusian authorities make the actions/ /events organized by this initiative part of their own actions/events dedicated to the 9th of May. The pro-Russian party “Union”⁵, widely announced in the beginning of 2021, was refused registration as well. It is obvious that the authorities do not want to lose their «monopoly on Russia» in favor of actors not controlled by them. Thus, the Belarusian authorities, being within the orbit of Russia’s cultural and ideological-axiological influence, not always limit or, more likely, do not limit their interaction with Russia at the level of government officials or Belarusian state-run non-state organizations (GoNGOs).

As examples of Russia’s direct influence on the activity of public organizations in Belarus, we shall consider three groups of organizations – cultural, expert-educational,

⁴ See more details on the history of the non-registration of the «Immortal Regiment» in Belarus <https://naviny.online/article/20190327/1553694517-bessmertnomu-polku-v-belarusi-otkaz-vayut-v-registracii> (Accessed 20.05.2021).

⁵ On the situation with the initiative called the “Party “Union”“ <https://sputnik.by/politics/20210505/1047550841/Osparivat-ne-budem-partiya-Soyuz-prokommentirovala-otkaz-v-registratsii.html> (Accessed 20.05.2021).

tional, and sports-military ones. Also, we shall present in brief the situation with the Russian influence in Belarusian GoNGOs.

Cultural organizations

Organizations in the cultural sphere in Belarus are one of the directions of support on the part of the Russian governmental agencies and foundations. Substantially close to them are organizations aimed at supporting compatriots.

The majority of organizations in this group are quite “old” and were founded back in the 1990s; we can also characterize them as rather “stable” ones. At the same time, they are scanty of members (about 20–100 persons) and are limited in the set of their actions (Union State 2012). The social base of such organizations is youth, women, pensioners, and teachers. To these target groups, traditional educational actions/events, as well as educational or other possibilities in Russia, are offered. The media activity of such organizations is limited; often do they have not even web-sites or pages in social networks. As a whole, despite a considerable quantity, these organizations are almost imperceptible and unknown to the general public. The examples of relatively active organizations in this group are: “The Russian House” (in Viciebsk and Mahiloŭ), “The House of Moscow” (Minsk), and the marginal as for its members, but rather active «Byelorussian Slavic Committee».

Organizations working in the educational and research sphere

Another type of pro-Russian actors in Belarus is educational organizations. They, as a rule, work with youth and students. At the level of formal connections and education establishments, some Russian universities have their branches in Belarus (e.g. Russian State Social University, Russian University of Economy in Minsk), as well as there are also Russian-Belarusian higher education establishments – for example, Belarusian-Russian University in Mahiloŭ. These are educational institutions that offer educational programs, i.e. it is impossible to say that they were created only to implement Russia’s influence. However, they can carry out separate pro-Russian actions/events (Mazepus et al. 2021).

As mentioned above, the foundation “Russian World” has its representations at regional universities in Belarus – their purpose is the advancement of the Russian language, education, and culture. Besides, in Belarus, there are also other pro-Russian educational-expert organizations. Thus, until the winter of 2020, there had been regular news on the activities of the «Russian-Byelorussian Expert

Club»; however, for a year, this organization's web-site and pages in social networks have not been updated. Also, it is possible to mention the activity of some establishments and organizations meant to be "expert" ones. For example, the national public movement «National Rapport» that carries out actions/events and publishes statements «aimed at protecting Russian-speaking people», as well as presented in May 2021 the pretentious report «The Mycelium. The purposes and methods of financing the Belarusian opposition by Western countries.»

Speaking of international scientific cooperation, Russia's institutions and Russia's financing are the most attractive (and available due to various reasons) to Belarusian researchers (Toshkov et al, 2019, 18; Mazepus 2021). It is also necessary to notice that the connections between Russia and Belarus become stronger because of the fact in Belarus' educational system, at all levels, Russian-language educational and scientific literature dominates.

Militarized and sports organizations

In Belarus, there are militarized and sports organizations that support the pro-Russian agenda and ideas. It is rather a wide range of organizations, including the Cossacks' ones, Afghan War veterans' ones, martial art clubs, etc. (Kłysiński & Żochowski 2016; Lutsevych 2016). They, as a rule, share and promote the ideas of Orthodoxy and traditional values, frequently combining them with the nostalgia for the Soviet Union and support to Stalin. They also advance the idea of the Slavic unity, patriotism, and counteraction to the influence of the Western values. At the institutional level, the Cossacks participate in actions/events initiated by the BOC in Belarus, as well as organize militarized summer camps for youth. In particular, the actions/events carried out in the Hrodna Vobłasc' [Region] in 2014 attracted a lot of attention on the part of experts and mass media⁶.

These organizations exist in the form of sports or militarized clubs. The information on their activity is limited and their activity seems to be of a local and sporadic character. Besides, the Belarusian authorities themselves do not welcome and/or even limit the activity of such organizations.

⁶ See more details on the camps organized by the Cossacks <https://euroradio.fm/navoshta-kazaki-treniruyucca-sa-zbroyay-u-belaruskih-lyasah> (Accessed 20.05.2021).

Belarusan GoNGOs as partners of Russia

In Belarus, as well as in other non-democratic states, there are public structures that are created and used by the government to imitate civil society and to service the interests of power (GoNGOs). They receive financing from the budget and, as a rule, declare a wide incidence of citizens and a considerable number of members⁷. Although, in many respects, the high quantity indicators are explained by the fact that people are forced to become members and that it is extremely difficult (if possible at all) to leave such organizations.

Being supported by the Belarusian authorities, GoNGOs also cooperate actively enough with various Russian partners and implement joint projects. Thus, for example, the list of partners of the BRSM (Belarusian National Youth Union) includes the Rossotrudnichestvo, Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Belarus and Russia, the BOC, the Russian Union of Youth, and other Russian organizations⁸. The BRSM actively cooperates with the Russian Union of Youth supported by the Russian government, regularly organizing various events connected with World War II and with the advancement of the ideas of the “brotherhood” and “unity” of young people of the two countries. The BRSM supports students’ construction crews that regularly participate in actions/events with Russian participation or in those carried out in Russia⁹. Similar examples of cooperation with Russian organizations or even Russian governmental structures can be found among other Belarusian GoNGOs, too. However, it is necessary to underline that this cooperation in reality can be of rather a formal character (Mazepus et al. 2021).

Conclusions

Summing up, it is possible to say that despite a significant amount and various spheres of activity of pro-Russian organizations in Belarus their real influence on society is quite limited. The connections with Russia, which exist at the level of politics, economy, culture, and religion, are so settled and strong that the activity of public organizations (except for the BOC) is in many respects formal and is often aimed more likely at receiving resource support than at real work with

⁷ E.g. more than 4 million people in the Federation of trade unions of Belarus; 140,000 members in the Belarusian Union of Women.

⁸ About BRSM partners: <https://brsm.by/partners/soviet-evropy/#content> (Accessed 20.05.2021).

⁹ One of examples of such cooperation <https://www.belta.by/society/view/brsm-i-rossijskie-studenty-razrabotali-dorozhnye-karty-sotrudnichestva-371542-2019> (Accessed 20.05.2021).

society. The level of real support and popularity of such organizations in Belarus is unknown.

At the same time, Belarus' structural connections with Russia through the Orthodox Church, through links of Belarusian large GoNGOs with Russian political actors and public organizations, the influence by means of culture, media, and education, are much deeper. Paradoxically enough is that the Belarusian government and Alexander Lukashenko simultaneously try not to allow the registration, not to promote, and even to some extent to limit the activity of Russian (e.g. the «Immortal Regiment»), pro-Russian political (the party "Union"), or militarized initiatives (the Cossacks' camps). It is partially possible to explain by the already mentioned unwillingness to lose the «monopoly on relations with Russia», as well as by the fact that in case of Russian initiatives that are connected with the symbolically significant senses (e.g. the 9th of May) the Belarusian authorities themselves try to use them in order to strengthen their legitimacy. In case of political structures – the authorities try not to allow the nascency of any potentially significant opponents; as for militarized organizations – they stick to the principle of restricting or preventing the functioning of such organizations in Belarus.

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Belarus' cultural sector during the liberalization: from the late 2014 to the early 2020

Miron Lidski

The period of the Belarusian cultural sector development we shall discuss in this article can be described not only by dates, but also by events that launched it and affected its completion.

Its beginning coincided with the time of the active start of the military conflict in the eastern parts of Ukraine in the second half of 2014, and its end had to do with the carrying-out of the presidential election on August, 9th, 2020 in Belarus and the further protests against the results.

Various experts call this period in different ways: liberalization, thaw, soft Belarusianization.

Liberalization concerned the economy, the public sector, and a new, fast growing branch – IT. Both independent and state-run mass media started to call Belarus “an IT country”.

“Soft Belarusianization” is another term applied to this period¹.

In 2019, in his article on Belarus' national identity, the researcher and BISS head Piotr Rudkoŭski defines the following tendencies:

“In the state policy, the trend “soft Belarusianization” is being applied: the strengthening of national identity by advancing the idea of the “long history” of Belarusian statehood and the cultivation of the identification role of the Belarusian language;

at the level of public opinion, there is a growth of “pro-Soviet” moods;

there is a trend of “Belarus-oriented” comprehension of the Soviet heritage – both at the state policy level and at the public opinion level;

¹ <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:yrbdfYnurboJ:https://nn.by/%3Fc%3Ddar%26i%3D205123+&cd=4&hl=be&ct=clnk&gl=by>

the perception of the Belarusian People's Republic [1918] passes from the stage "It is negative" to the stage "I do not know" – it happens both at the public opinion level and at the state policy level"².

The terms "soft Belarusianization" and "Belarusian nationalism" were also used actively by Russia's propaganda in order to characterize this period, but in the negative way, as it was afraid that in Belarus it would be the same "as in Ukraine"³.

In general, while evaluating this period, it is unequivocally possible to say that it was characterized by a considerable improvement of the conditions of public work, cultural activity, and business with a strongly pronounced national character.

It is possible to mention six directions of cultural activity that became the most visible ones during this period in the media space and successful ones if we measure their influence on processes in the country:

- incipency and development of public creative spaces, creative hubs, cultural centers, galleries,
- active development of initiatives in the format of public courses of the Belarusian language,
- expansion of numerous initiatives connected with the popularization and advancement of the national symbols; incipience of a commercial component in their activity,
- active integration of business in the public and cultural sector,
- carrying-out of mass society-significant actions/events with a considerable quantity of people in the format of bicycle parades, festivals, open airs, marathons,
- monumental art: from street art to horse monuments.

Space

In comparison with the number of public spaces in 2010–2013, the situation very soon started to change for the better. Thus, for example, in the beginning of 2012 in Minsk there actually existed two basic platforms where public organizations could carry out their actions/events without hindrance – the gallery "U" and the cultural platform "Art Manor".

Then the situation soon started to change. New spaces began to open in various places in the city: Tsekh, Balki, Space, Korpus8, Verkh.

² <https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2019/page12.html>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_Belarusization; https://ru.abcdef.wiki/wiki/Soft_Belarusization

During the same time, an absolutely new to Belarus platform began its work – the startup hub Imaguru. Naŭcia Chamiankova, one of the founders of this space, said that “Imaguru is the first in Belarus startup hub: a co-working for joint work of startups, training and networking. The club activity is focused on two basic directions: business and innovations”.



We shall also underline that the organization gave its platforms to carry out actions/events to public initiatives of absolutely different directions.

In 2017, with the assistance of Belgazprombank, on October Street, which at that point had already become one of the most popular party places in Minsk, the big cultural hub OK16 was opened; the space “Tsekh” moved on the same street, too⁴.

⁴In 2016, the state-run newspaper “Zviazda” wrote about it: <https://zviazda.by/be/news/20160320/1458481438-tvorchyya-prastory>



Belarusan language

With the development of the infrastructure for public actions/events, the variety of their formats grows as well. Among them – there are free-of-charge public courses of the Belarusian language. In 2013–2014, in Minsk, the language courses “Language, or Coffee” [“Mova ci kava”] appeared and soon became popular; they were carried out in the spaces “U” and “Tsekh”; they also appeared in other cities and countries.

In 2014, the writer and linguist Alaksieï Šejin began his language courses “Movaveda” [“Linguist”] that were carried out in the business center “Valeo” and the platform “Art Manor”. The courses were accompanied by creative commercials that became viral⁵.

Also, in 2014, the journalist Hleb Łabadzienka and the philologist Alesia Litvinoŭskaia began their courses “Language Anew” [“Mova Nanova”] that were at first carried out in the gallery “U” and then in the café “Hraï”. The project started to develop actively: except for weekly offline meetings, there were Youtube programs; there were textbooks of these courses; online lessons; students’ ID cards. The courses began to independently happen in Astraviec, Brasłaŭ, Babruisk,

⁵ E.g.: <https://youtu.be/SAHZB-RW5-M>

Baranavičy, Barysaŭ, Brest, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Homiel, Mahiloŭ, Maładziečna, Rečyca, Śvietłahorsk, and Salihorsk⁶.



On February, 22nd, 2015, the “Art Manor” team and the cultural platform “Belarusian Space” gathered for the first time in the startup hub Imaguru the numerous Belarusian-language creative initiatives, language courses, business projects, manufacturers of souvenirs and postcards, interesting musicians, and distinctive creators, together for the “Native Tongue Holiday” to demonstrate that the Belarusian language is not only alive and develops, but also inspires many people to do interesting and vivid projects and good things.

Every year, the tradition of celebrating the International Day of the native tongue became more and more big. As a result, on February, 22nd, 2020, in the Minsk-based cultural hub “OK16”, the “Art Manor” – with the support of the general partner “Alivaryja” – gathered 50 Belarusian companies, organizations, initiatives, and creative collectives for the large-scale holiday “Language Festival” that on that day was visited by about ten thousand people⁷.

⁶ The project web-site today presents more than 200 classes on different topics: <https://www.movananova.by/zaniatki/>

⁷ Festival web-site: <http://movafest.by/>



Responsible business

Business started to join the “language projects” actively. The company A-100 began to communicate with clients at their petrol stations in the Belarusian language; the breweries “Alivaryja” and “Lidskaje” Belarusianized themselves and use the Belarusian language not only on labels, in videos and social networks, but also make Belarusian-language festivals, national dictations, actively cooperate with public initiatives that are engaged in the native tongue popularization.

The factory “Luch” manufactures several series of clocks dedicated to the Belarusian language, and the company “Mark Formelle” – collections of fashionable clothes and socks with the Belarusian language on them. The state-run bank “Moscow-Minsk” made rebranding and became the bank “Dabrabyt” [“prosperity” in Belarusian], supported the “Language Festival”, made videos in Belarusian⁸ and erected a monument with “Pahonia” near the main office.

The biggest mobile operator of Belarus – the company A1 – established in all the regional cities the interactive platforms “LANGUAGE” and added the “support to

⁸ Video: https://bankdabrabyt.by/by/about/news/novosti_bank/zaprashaem-usikh-na-nikalnae-svyata-mova-fest-prymerkavanae-da-mizhnarodnaga-dnya-rodnay-movy/

the Belarusian language” to the priorities of its program of corporate social responsibility.



For the last 5 years, it is possible to recall hundreds of such examples of active participation of business in the advancement of the Belarusian language.

One more vivid direction in the popularization of the Belarusian language was the Belarusian week-ends⁹. The Belarusian week-ends are the project where well-known actors and figures of show business dub hits and new films in Belarusian so that spectators could watch them at the best cinemas of Minsk and other cities of Belarus.

The project was created in 2016 by the company “Kinakong”, and since 2017 it translates, dubs, and distributes films with the partner support of Velcom (after its rebranding in 2019 – A1). For the two years of its existence, the films of the project “Belarusian week-ends” were watched by about 57 thousand spectators. Films in the Belarusian language were demonstrated in more than 60 cinemas in 40 cities of the country.

⁹ <https://marketing.by/keysy/57-tysyach-gledacho-belaruskikh-uikenda-yak-u-velcom-atrymalasya-padtrymats-kino-na-belaruskay-move-/>



Except for A1, the most visible company that actively sponsored society-significant Belarusian projects was the Belgazprombank headed by Viktor Babariko.

In March 2014, in the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, with the support of the Belgazprombank, the project “Ten centuries of Belarusian art” was opened – the biggest exposition (during the years of Belarus’ independence) of subjects of the Belarusian people’s cultural heritage.



In 2015, there was the first “Belgazprombank Autumn Salon” – an exhibition-sale of paintings of contemporary Belarusian artists. The Salon is part of the large-scale initiative “Art Belarus” that demonstrates not only the rich past of Belarusian art, but also opens its future prospects and today’s potential.

Since April, 14th, 2017 in the Minsk Palace of Arts there began its work the constantly working gallery of the project “Art Belarus” where for the first time in our country within the limits of one exposition there are more than 50 masterpieces of Belarusian masters from the corporate collection of the Belgazprombank, including the painting “Eve” by Chaïm Soutine – in 2020 it became one of the symbols of the Belarusian revolution.

During the same period, the Belgazprombank also had to do with the launch of the crowdfunding platforms ulej.by and molamola.by, the edition of the complete collection of works by Svetlana Alexievich in the Belarusian language, and the appearance of the cultural hub OK16.

Ornament and Pahonia

The year 2014 became the beginning of a large-scale wave of the popularity of the Belarusian ornament and the “legalization” of the national coat of arms Pahonia [“Pursuit”] and the national white-red-white flag. It was started by the action “Belarusian Ribbon” initiated by the “Art Manor”. On December, 6th, 2014, activists and volunteers distributed in Minsk more than 12 thousand white-red ribbons with the Belarusian ornament. In general, more than 100 volunteers took part in the action under the slogan “Mark yourself as a Belarusian”.



The first action “Belarusian Ribbon” was timed for the festival of national culture “Day of Vyšyvanka [the national embroidered shirt]” that took place on December, 13th, 2014 in the Palace of Arts. It gathered thousands of visitors, was entirely organized by public initiatives, and became the beginning of the “Vyšyvanka Trend” that lasted for five years.



In 2015, the grand prix of the Belarusian-language advertising festival “Ad.nak!” was awarded to the project “Vyšymaika”. Together with the store Symbol.by there appeared and actively developed new and new Belarusian-language brands of clothes that popularize the Belarusian language, national symbols, history, culture, and traditions: LSTR, Honar, Distinctiveness, My Native Land, Dream, By The Way, Zhart, Hmarachos, Jimbryk, Fainy, and others.

There appeared the catalogs Svaje.by and Say.by that collected and structured commercial and public initiatives with a strongly pronounced national color.

In 2016, MACMI (International agency of social and marketing researches) together with marketing.by conducted a research aimed at studying the effect of the Vyšyvanka on wrappings of Belarusian manufacturers¹⁰.

The distribution of the ribbon with ornaments and the popularity of the action “Belarusian Ribbon” were, inter alia, a response to the attempts of the pro-Russian forces to impose Saint George’s ribbon on the Belarusians against the backdrop of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

In 2015, this action was picked up by state-run organizations, such as the BRSM (Belarusian National Youth Union) and the party “White Russia”; the ribbons

¹⁰ Results: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/27641306.html>; <https://marketing.by/analitika/kak-rabotaet-effekt-vyshivanki-na-magazinnoy-polke-masmi-issledovalo-vzglyad-pokupatelya/>

with ornaments appeared in wide retail trade and were actively used in different formats and at different state levels. On July, 2nd, 2016, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, the Minsk City Executive Committee, and the BRSM organized the state holiday “Day of Vyšyvanka” near the Palace of Sports in Minsk.



At the same time, there was a conditional “legalization” of the coat of arms “Pahonia” and the white-red-white flag. It can be seen by the facts that:

- various business initiatives are not forbidden to distribute legally things with these symbols, to sell them in stores and during actions/events,
- it is possible to meet more and more people with Pahonia T-shirts in public places and fans at stadiums and the police do not touch them,
- it is possible to see white-red-white flags more and more often during cultural and sports actions/events and it does not cause consequences for people who have these flags,
- in 2018 and 2019 there were legal celebrations of the Freedom Day with the mass use of white-red-white flags.



A new wave of the “Pahonia” popularization actually began after an act of pupils of the Brest Regional Cadet School, who on October, 16th, 2015 posted a photo of four cadets with “Pahonia” T-shirts in the VK community “My Country Belarus”.



The guys received reprimands for this act and were punished by the School, and in order to support them there began the large-scale flashmob “Pahonia Nearby” when thousands of people spread pictures with the “Pahonia”.



At this time, the attempts to give the white-red-white flag the status of historical and cultural value did not stop.

In 2016, to the 25th anniversary of the date (September, 19th, 1991) when the “Pahonia” and the white-red-white flag received the status of the state symbols, Žmicier Daškevič and the “Young Front” publicly in various cities of Belarus collected signatures to grant the white-red-white flag the status of non-material historical and cultural value¹¹.



¹¹ <https://www.racyja.com/hramadstva/raspachaty-zbor-podpisau-za-bel-chyrvon/>

In 2018, the deputy of the Houses of Representatives Hanna Kanapackaïa with her team developed a bill about the use and protection of the white-red-white flag, but it was not considered in the Parliament¹².

Festivals

The NGOs' presence at big festivals in different corners of Belarus became a usual thing. They participated in the festivals: A-Fest, Our Day, Vulitsa Ezha, Vulica Brasil, Language Festival, Vyšyvanka Day, BPR100, Sprava, Viva Braslav, Viva the Bicycle!, Sun Holiday, Pradmova, and others.

In general, the years 2014–2020 gave birth to tens of festivals in different corners of Belarus, the majority of which became annual and collected thousands of visitors prior to Covid-19 and the summer of 2020.

Monuments and street art

Crowdfunding and support by local businesses resulted in the nascence of a considerable number of important for the country monumental works in 2014–2020.

On May, 12th, 2018, in the majontak [manor house] of Maračouščyna where Thaddeus Kosciuszko was born, a monument was erected. The solemn opening event happened in the presence of diplomats, employees of ministries, civil servants, and the public. Over the monument flew both state and white-red-white flags. The Belarusian project was implemented thanks to Hleb Łabadzienka and other non-indifferent people. 700 people collected the necessary means, having responded to the appeal on the crowdfunding platform talaka.by.

In October 2017, the Lida District Executive Committee declared a contest of the best sketch of the sculpture “Grand Duke Hiedymin, the founder of the castle”, in which 28 works took part. In February 2018, after counting of votes, the joint sketch by the sculptors Volha Niačai and Siarhieï Ahanaŭ won. On August, 12th, 2019, the equestrian statue of Hiedymin was erected; its solemn opening took place on September, 7th.

On June, 1st, 2018, in Hrodna, the monument to Prince David Haradzienski was solemnly opened. David Haradzienski is on a horse; in his right hand he has a sword, in his left hand – a cross as a symbol of Christianity.

¹² <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29221422.html>



In 2014, in Viciebsk, the equestrian statue to Grand Duke Alhierd was erected.

As a matter of fact, an absolutely new direction of monumental art for Belarus was a possibility since 2014 to receive permissions and to coordinate big murals on walls of houses.

It began with the project Vulica Brasil¹³ – the festival of street art, when Brazilian and Belarusian artists painted walls in different locations of Minsk, creating huge murals.

¹³ <https://34mag.net/post/vulica-brasil2019>



Thanks to the street art projects Signal, MustAct, and Urban Myths, for the last seven years – since 2014, the façades of numerous high-rise buildings in different cities of Belarus were decorated with murals that reveal Belarusian culture, traditions, and national hue in a new way¹⁴.



¹⁴ More projects: <https://mustact.by/rus/projects/>



What can be said? As of the summer of 2021, the majority of these initiatives cannot continue their activity: some activists left Belarus because of the repressions; some activists are in prison; some stopped their activity because their establishments, foundations, and public organizations had been liquidated; some wait for a new window of opportunities when the political crisis in Belarus is over.

The events of 2020 gave birth to many other various initiatives, the majority of which operates now anonymously or from abroad.

The church community: from humbleness to zeal

Aliaksandr Shramko

In the religious sphere, the basic actors in Belarus are the official confessional structures, basically Christian ones. Orthodoxy is represented by the Byelorussian Orthodox Church (BOC, or the Byelorussian Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchy) and in a very small degree, almost nominally, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (BAOC) that has no registration in the Republic of Belarus. Roman Catholicism is represented by 4 independent dioceses (eparchies) headed by bishops united in a coordinating body – the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus (CCBB)¹. Graeco-Catholicism (Uniates) is represented by the Belarusian Graeco-Catholic Church (BGCC) headed by the Apostolic Visitor. Protestantism is represented by various autonomous denominations, among which the most visible ones in the public sphere are: the United Church of the Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostalism), the Association of the Communities of the Christians of the Full Gospel (the Charismatic Movement), and the Union of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists.

All civic initiatives are associated to a greater or lesser degree with these official structures, including the situations when they act comparatively independently. A unique phenomenon is the political party (meanwhile, it is not officially registered): the Belarusian Christian Democracy and the group «Christian Vision» that appeared on the wave of the protests in 2020. Both these initiatives are of multi-religious character on principle and, accordingly, do not associate themselves with any church structure. Among non-Christian structures, it is necessary to mark especially the religious association of communities of progressive Judaism headed by its chief rabbi Grigoriy Abramovich, which is appreciably visible in the public space.

¹ <https://catholic.by/3/kasciol/parishes>

As for the degree of influence on public life and attention to them on the part of society, due to the historical tradition, the Orthodox and Roman Catholic faiths stand out. It is attested by the statistics. Thus, in 2015, according to a poll, 63,5% of the population of Belarus identified themselves as believers, out of them – 83,0% Orthodox, 9,5% Roman Catholics². The state basically pays attention to these two leading faiths and lays its expectations on them. Therefore, the dictatorship blamed them for the position of the religious during the protests, which resulted in the essential personnel changes in their administrations.

The widely-used thesis «the Church is out of politics», from the point of view of the regime, only means that the Church must have no independent position, must support implicitly the authorities' actions and politics everywhere and in everything, or, at least, must demonstrate its tacit consent. Therefore, the authorities consider it «out of politics» when they force the Church to take part in election campaigns in favor of the ruling regime.

From elections to elections

In 2015–2020, there were some changes in the relations between the state and both Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. To a degree, it had to do with personnel changes in the hierarchy. Thus, in the BOC, in December 2013, the long-term head and founder of the Byelorussian Exarchate metropolitan Philaret (Vakhromeyev) was sent to rest; instead of him, metropolitan Pavel (Ponomaryov), a Russian hierarch, who had never had any relations with Belarus, was appointed³. There were some assumptions that Alexander Lukashenko did not like this appointment, which led to certain coldness and tensions in the relations of power with the BOC management, which reached its culmination during the events of 2020 when metropolitan Pavel was replaced by Veniamin (Tupeko), a Belarusian citizen who supports the regime completely.

In 2015, the Roman Catholics had a replacement not so essential and not actually in the management, but significant: the charismatic archbishop Claudio Gugerotti was replaced from the post of Apostolic Nuncio; instead of him, in 2016, the archbishop Gábor Pintér, a figure much less vivid, was appointed⁴. This replacement ended completely the period (since the late 2000s) of some thaw in the relations of the regime with the Roman Catholic Church and the last hopes of the once promised concordat disappeared.

² <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2016/page19.html>

³ <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3478892.html>

⁴ <http://www.gcatholic.org/dioceses/nunciature/nunc019.htm>

Thus, the relations of the state with the two leading denominations started to receive a more and more routine-bureaucratic character. A certain stir was caused by the unexpected initiative of the metropolitan Pavel in the end of 2014, that is only a year after he became the exarch, concerning a bigger degree of the independence of the Byelorussian Exarchate from the Moscow center⁵. The initiative encountered the Moscow Patriarchy's rigid resistance and failed, but this story slightly opened the veiled aspirations of the authorities to have the autocephaly (independence) of the BOC, which was proved by the later events, especially when a local bishop who resignedly supports the regime was appointed the exarch.

The authorities could not even dream of a similar attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church. Besides the fact that it is ruled from the Vatican uncontrolled by the regime, its local hierarches also demonstrate much bigger independence. Thus, the metropolitan of Minsk-Mahiloŭ archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz repeatedly acted with statements concerning acute public events, e.g. in connection with the conflict in Kurapaty or arrests of public figures and politicians. Therefore, the authorities acted within the framework of the same strategy aimed at strengthening their influence if not at the top level, then at the level of the ordinary clergy. For this reason, the pressure upon the Roman Catholic Church is growing: the regime wants to increase the share of priests of local origin and citizenship and to decrease the number of clergymen from Poland, up to a pre-schedule exclusion of some of them from the country on far-fetched pretexts⁶.

The visible precedent of making the Churches service the regime ideologically was the so-called "Prayer For Belarus"⁷ with participation of the higher hierarches of not only the two leading Christian faiths, but also Judaists and Moslems, which was organized in 2015 within the scope of Alexander Lukashenko's presidential election campaign.

⁵ <https://churchby.info/rus/974>

⁶ Vasilevich Natalia. «The Belarusian state, the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, the Vatican, and Polish priests.» For Free Faith. 2 Feb. 2015. Web. 3 Apr. 2016. – <http://forb.by/node/499>

⁷ «The pre-election ceremony called "The Prayer For Belarus"» Portal "Carkva". 2 Oct. 2015. Web. 3 Apr. 2016 – <http://churchby.info/rus/news/2015-10-06/sostoyalos-predvybornaya-ceremoniya-pod-nazvaniem-molitva-za-belarus>

Orthodox initiatives and their contradictoriness

If civic initiatives of Protestants and Roman Catholics (e.g. the charitable mission “Caritas Belarus”) were in the channel of the strategies chosen by the denominations that are more free in view of their bigger remoteness from power, then the corresponding initiatives of Orthodox Christians and the BOC management itself demonstrated some contradictoriness that has to do with the problem of showing their complete loyalty, as the leading faith, and of displaying independent positions on topical and thorny questions.

It can be seen clearly on the example of the pro-life movement against abortions. Such movements all over the world have a considerable protest component that is able to unite different faiths and political forces. In September 2013, together with movements of other faiths and even the political party “Belarusian Christian Democracy”, Orthodox proliferers even intended to organize a national march under the motto «For life, for family, for children». However, at the last minute, Orthodox activists distanced from the requirements to change the legislation⁸. In the ensuing years, this movement completely departed from any claims on the regime, and, contrary to all logic, blames the “threats” from the West: homosexuality, juvenile justice, sexual education, gender ideology and euthanasia⁹.

Similar contradictoriness of the BOC’s positions was also shown in relation to the national identity question. On the one hand, the BOC, especially during the metropolitan Pavel, expanded the use of the Belarusian language, and there were regular services in the Belarusian language at least in four Orthodox temples in Minsk, in the Minsk Region – in two, in Hrodna – in four. To the 500th anniversary of Francysk Skaryna’s Bible, the first official Orthodox translation of the New Testament into the Belarusian language was published. The BOC official web-site received a full-fledged Belarusian-language version. Still, at the same time, there is an active process of canonization of the metropolitan of Lithuania and Vilnius Joseph (Semashko), around which the BOC’s pro-Russian forces are gathering, and under the aegis of the BOC there is a process of organizing youth military-patriotic camps with the imperial pro-Russian ideology¹⁰.

⁸ <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2013/page20.html>

⁹ https://www.academia.edu/44568893/Vasilevich_Natallia_Going_Political_The_Involvement_of_Churches_in_Public_Debates_on_Prolife_Issues_in_Belarus_In_Bodrov_A_Garret_S_M_ed_S_M_ed_S_M_ed_Theology_and_the_Political_Theo_political_Reflections_on_Contemporary_Politics_in_Ecumenical_Conversation_Brill_2020_200_227

¹⁰ <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2018/page17.html>

Against this backdrop, the unprecedented step of the former Press Secretary of the Byelorussian Exarchate archpriest Sergiy Lepin, who took part in the celebrating of the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic (1918) in 2018, did look sensationally¹¹.

Also, remarkable is the reaction of the BOC Synod expressed by the metropolitan Pavel towards the project of a decision of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus prepared in December 2016 «About the Standards of medical ethics and deontology». This project, among other requirements to the appearance of medical and pharmaceutical workers, contained an interdiction to demonstrate one's religious belonging, open carrying of religious symbolics. In his letter to the Minister of Health, the metropolitan Pavel opposed this requirement, referred to its illegality, and reminded of the program of cooperation of the Ministry of Health and the BOC signed in 2003, and also warned of the threat of religious conflicts in society and protests of believers. As a result, the interdiction to demonstrate one's religious belonging was removed from the project¹².

However, in general, the BOC management does not risk to mar its relations with the regime and is afraid of any activism; therefore, initiatives start to leave for the local level that is connected not with the BOC management, but with civil society. Among such initiatives: the festival "Pamiežža", the consolidation of Belarusian independent theologians around the theological section of the International Congress of Belarusian Scientists, and the launch of the Network of Cooperation of Belarusian Theologians Abroad¹³.

The experience of self-organization on a distance from the management played its positive role during the protests in 2020. The same can be said about the informal solidarity of the religious of different denominations and religions.

Cooperation of denominations and initiatives

Recently, the official cooperation of denominations has been reduced to a minimum. Actually, it is only revealed in joint ideological and pre-election actions under the aegis of the state, i.e. it is not their own initiative. It can be explained by various factors, including the regime's purposeful strategy aimed at the unequal position of faiths, which is even present in the preamble of the "Law on freedom of worship and religious organizations". A considerable role was also played by

¹¹ <http://church.by/news/protoierej-sergij-lepin-o-bnr-rusofobii-politike-i-russkom-mire>

¹² For Free Faith. 24 Dec. 2016. Web 13 Mar. 2017 – <http://forb.by/node/680>

¹³ <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2018/page17.html>

the leaving from the post of the BOC head metropolitan Philaret (Vakhromeyev) who was known for his ecumenical ideas, especially at the international scene.

Against the backdrop of this disjunction, the criticism from conservative positions of the concept of the Law of Belarus «About counteraction to domestic violence» suggested by the Ministry of Internal Affairs deserves especial attention. The first who acted against the proposed law was the head of the Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz who declared that the concept «attacks the traditional family values, deeply contradicts the national, cultural, and spiritual traditions of the Belarusian people»¹⁴. Then, this criticism was joined by the created in this connection Coordination Council of public pro-family forces of Belarus that included the public charity organization «Save Babies», the Homiel-based public charity organization «Center to support family and motherhood “Mamaletto”», the social education establishment «Paternity», the youth public charity organization «City Without Drugs», the charitable foundation «Open Hearts», the social education establishment “Center to support family, motherhood, and childhood “Pokrova””, representatives of the United Church of the Christians of the Evangelical Faith in Belarus, representatives of the Union of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists and other organizations. As a result, the Ministry of Internal Affairs preferred to refuse the preparation of this law, saying that this decision is caused «by a high public resonance and the opinion of religious organizations»¹⁵.

The situation with the barbarous pulling-down of crosses in Kurapaty became one more display of solidarity of the Churches and civil society. The archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz acted with a special statement and became the official voice of this whole-nation protest¹⁶. The Orthodox hierarchy decided to keep silent; only the BOC Press Secretary archpriest Sergiy Lepin expressed “concern” in the interview to Radio Liberty¹⁷.

¹⁴ <https://katolik.life/rus/news/sotsium/item/3723-eto-yuvenalnaya-yustitsiya-prolajfery-belarusi-protiv-proekta-zakona-mvd.html>

¹⁵ <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2019/page18.html>

¹⁶ <https://catholic.by/3/news/belarus/9641-zayava-starshyni-kanferentsyi-katalitskikh-biskupa-u-belarusi-adnosna-situatsyi-kurapatakh>

¹⁷ <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29860549.html>

Attitude to the protests in 2020 and participation in them

Initiatives at the civic church level appeared before the election. In parallel with the campaign «A Roman Catholic does not rig»¹⁸, Orthodox believers spread on the Internet the poster «Orthodox believers are against: falsifications, humiliation of the person, pressure upon the person»¹⁹ signed by a number of priests and workers of church structures.

After the election, believers acted against the violence. Under the initiative from below, by the way – from Orthodox believers, in Minsk there began joint molebens (services of intercession or services of supplication) near the Town Hall and religious processions of Christians of different denominations. Some priests took part in rendering assistance to the detained and victims, and some of them openly joined the protests.

In the BOC hierarchy, the positions varied from the categorical condemnation of violence (archbishop Artemiy (Kishchenko) to the unconditional support of the actions of the regime (archbishop Guriy (Apalko). The metropolitan Pavel fluctuated; although, nonetheless, he showed some sympathy for the victims and visited them in a hospital; he also supported the molebens²⁰.

A more consolidated and well-defined position was again demonstrated by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz urged «to put an end to the violence» and «immediately to call a special round table» for dialogue²¹.

Among the joint actions of believers, along with the prayers near the Town Hall, it is necessary to mention the grandiose Christian action «Repentance Chain»²². Christians of different denominations built in Minsk a prayer chain in the length of about 15 km from the place of mass Stalin executions to the prison where the detained people were contained during the protests and where there were terrible tortures in large quantities.

The regime answered with the immediate change of the Orthodox exarch and the expulsion from the country of the Roman Catholic metropolitan Tadeusz Kon-

¹⁸ (<https://flagshtok.info/by/vybary-2020/katolik-ne-falsificiruet-verujuscie-vystupajut-protiv-falsifikacii-vyborov.html>)

¹⁹ <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/pravoslavnye-svyashhenniki-zapustili-fleshmob-protiv-falsifikatsij/>

²⁰ <http://www.church.by/news/patriarshij-ekzarh-navestil-ljudej-postradavshih-v-hode-protestnyh-akcij>

²¹ <https://catholic.by/3/news/belarus/11991-zvarot-artsyb-skupa-tadevusha-kandrusev-cha-suv-yaz-sa-skladanaj-gramadska-pal-tychnaj-s-tuatsyyaj-u-belarus>

²² <https://t.me/popoffside/587>

drusiewicz who was replaced subsequently by a more loyal hierarch. Then, the BOC's new management sent the "protest" archbishop Artemiy (Kishchenko) to rest. Cleansings of priests at lower levels began. As a result, the church official organs appeared to be openly pro-regime now. Here, the experience of independent initiativeness of church society at the lowest level, like the organization of civil society, was quite useful. One of its operating displays is the group «Christian Vision»²³ that united Christians of different denominations in order to develop a coordinated position, to help those who are being repressed, and to inform the public on the prosecution of believers on political grounds.

²³ <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/missiya-gruppy-hristianskoe-videnie-v-tekushhem-politicheskom-krizise-v-belarusi/>

Belarusan educational initiatives in 2015–2020: from a gradual growth to the mass destruction

Katsiaryna M. Kukso

In independent Belarus, the activity of Belarusan educational organizations can be described as three waves that gradually changed each other:

The first wave of a rapid growth took place in the early post-Soviet times when the previous restrictions and barriers were removed, when new ideas became available, when possibilities of cooperation with Western countries appeared. It is possible to consider the end of this wave the mid-1990s when the activity of foreign foundations and initiatives was forbidden (one of the most notable cases is the interdiction of the activity of George Soros' foundation that supported, inter alia, educational projects, too ¹.

The second wave can be called “the development athwart the circumstances”. It was less intensive in comparison with the previous one, but also considerable: it lasted from the late 1990s and to the early 2010s². At this time, there appeared new initiatives, although simultaneously there was a gradual growth of regimentation, regulations on the part of the state. New enactments that substantially hindered public educational activities were accepted. Here, it is possible to mention, for example, the perforce to receive the “permit to leave” for educational groups of pupils or students from the Ministry of Education³, the necessity to

¹ Smolyanko O., Chausov Y. The state policy anent non-commercial organizations in the Republic of Belarus in the context of the European standards of freedom, Minsk, 2016. https://www.lawtrend.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Gosudarstvennaya-politika_NKO-ES-3.pdf

² This stage is described in detail in the following article: Babrovich V. Civic Education in Belarus: concepts, standards, and lack of demand from the society// Civil Society in Belarus, 2000–2015. East European Democratic Center, Warsaw, 2015. https://issuu.com/eedc_warsaw/docs/final_civil_society_in_belarus_inte_5d21802f640249

³ About some questions of sending minors to receive education and treatment... The Decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus d/d 15 January 2008. <http://zakonby.net/>

register all humanitarian aid from abroad⁴, etc. This “supreregulationness” was preserved and deepened after the 2010 election.

The third wave, a wave of “relative freedom”, took place in the late 2010s and lasted until the 2020 election and post-election events. At this time, certain liberalization was observed in the public, cultural, and economic life of Belarus. Though this period is better described by the term “fictitious liberalization” – because the environment did not become more favorable and the previous interdictions continued to be applied. At the same time, some changes in the economy, political vector, and public life created favorable conditions for the development of new initiatives.

The basic positive tendencies that influenced the educational landscape are the following:

FIRST, the multiple-vector policy declared by the Belarusian government; “soft Belarusianization”. After the Crimean events in 2014, Belarus was positioned as a country open to the West and democratic values; therefore, a growth of interactions with international organizations was observed. E.g. during this period it is possible to mention the cooperation with the World Bank aimed at modernizing the educational system, which was launched in 2015⁵. Thus, Belarus participated for the first time in the international research of pupils’ achievements PISA-2018⁶. The discussion of the results of this study created a positive precedent of a joint analysis of a certain phenomenon by different initiatives and journalists.

SECOND, the increase of a share of private businesses and the middle class⁷. The rapid growth of the IT sphere and the development of business as a whole led to the creation of a rather wide layer of people who have high incomes and demand for quality education. It created the preconditions for the foundation and development of private schools; a fast growth of commercial educational

postanovlenie/34406–postanovlenie-soveta-ministrov-respubliki-belarus-ot-15012008–n-33–red-ot-08062012–quoto-nekotoryh-voprosah-napravleniya-nesovershennoletnih-na-obuchenie-i-lechenie-za-predely-respubliki-belarusquot.html

⁴ Gratuitous foreign aid: receipt, registration and usage. http://dha.gov.by/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Gratuitous-foreign-aid-receipt_registration-and-usage.doc

⁵ Project description: <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P148181>

⁶ The results: <https://pisabyregion.oecd.org/belarus/>

⁷ Alexander Chubrik. Back to the future, or a short historical review of the Belarusian private sector (2021) <http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/english/pdp/dp2021r03.pdf>

organizations⁸; the blossoming of educational initiatives aimed at intellectual leisure; the development of volunteer initiatives in education. Thus, despite the difficult procedure of receiving the license, there appeared new private schools that have more freedom in the working-out of their educational process in comparison with the state-run ones and that can offer new ideas for education. The growth of commercial educational organizations can be considered a positive factor for the non-commercial sector: a research of the interaction of educational initiatives has demonstrated that between them there is some cooperation, which increases the general social capital in this branch.

THIRD, the presence of the general challenge, a uniting agenda. It was revealed most vividly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Belarusian authorities' COVID-dissidentness affected the educational system as well. The Ministry of Education did not give any recommendations to schools and universities on how to organize their work in the conditions of the pandemic, how to use remote tools. It became a challenge for educational organizations and initiatives and it simultaneously became a basis for on-line cooperation. For example, pieces of advice for teachers at schools were simultaneously developed by representatives of educational initiatives, foundations, private schools, IT companies, and communities of teachers. The real and sensitive problem became a trigger for the cooperation of educational organizations and partially adjusted the means of on-line communication.

The basic constraining factors in 2015–2020 were still the supraregulationness and bureaucratization of education on the part of the state. The Ministry of Education staked on the strategy of the unification of schools and regulation of activity of educational institutions; it refused all active actions within the framework of the implementation of the Bologna Agreement⁹, which did not promote the development of diversity, ideas, and approaches and constrained the potential cooperation of state-run and non-state organizations.

The third wave definitively ended in the summer of 2021 when a considerable part of non-state educational organizations were liquidated by the state and their leaders were compelled to leave Belarus or to suspend their activity; some of them underwent criminal prosecution.

⁸ Aksana Shelest, Andrei Yahorau, Olga Smolyanko. Civil society of Belarus: today's condition and development conditions, Minsk, 2018. http://belaruspolicy.skaryna.org.uk/sites/default/files/articles/06.11.2018/2018_civil-society-belarus_ru.pdf

⁹ http://bolognaby.org/images/uploads/2020/01/Monitoring_str_plan_jan2020.pdf

Survey of the educational organizations sector

In Belarus, there is no veracious statistics on the number of existing educational organizations and initiatives. It can be explained by several factors. A part of educational organizations are not registered officially or registered as legal entities in other countries. A significant amount of public organizations have several lines of activity, among which there is also education or enlightenment, although this is often not their basic direction of work.

It is possible to define several types of public organizations in the educational sphere:

FIRST, the organizations, which are engaged in the development of the educational sector in Belarus (infrastructure, support to educators, educational policy) and have it as the basic direction of their work. Specialization of such organizations can be various:

- Secondary education (e.g. the Belarusian Schools Association organized courses, information support to teachers; EdCamp carried out public educational actions/events for teachers; the foundation “New School” supported school initiatives, including the project “Teacher For Belarus”; etc.).
- Higher education (e.g. Public Bologna Committee, students’ associations: Belarusian Students Association, BOSS).
- Additional education and education of adults (e.g. German international organization “DVV International”, Center of information support of public initiatives “Third Sector”).
- Associations in the field of education (Additional Education and Enlightenment Association, Business Education Association, Education for Sustainable Development, Private Schools Association).

SECOND, educational and enlightenment initiatives and organizations. Here, it is possible to include organizations that worked according to the principles of alternative universities: for example, Flying University, Belarusian Collegium, ECLAB. Another type is narrower initiatives in the field of culture: for example, the courses of the Belarusian language “Mova Nanova”, the resource WIR.by, etc.

THIRD, public organizations, which – within the scope of their activity – have educational or enlightenment projects. E.g. human rights defending organizations (Human Constanta, Belarusian Helsinki Committee), environmental and nature protection ones (EcoHome, Environmental Solutions Center, Belarusian Birds Protection), religious ones (YMCA Belarus, Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women), and other organizations.

FOURTH, commercial establishments and organizations that influence public education or other non-commercial educational organizations. For example, educational initiatives (Open Lecture Hall, the intellectual leisure center “Open Classroom”), initiatives of private schools aimed at supporting secondary education (e.g. methodical help during the pandemic, intellectual brunches), free courses organized by IT companies, etc.

Interaction of educational initiatives

At the end of 2020 – the beginning of 2021, there was a research of interactions of Belarusan educational organizations and initiatives¹⁰. The data were gathered and analyzed according to the methodology of social network analysis and the “snow-ball” principle. In total, there were 256 unique organizations or informal initiatives (including commercial organizations). This figure allows us to estimate approximately the quantity of active organizations in the field of education. The results of this research demonstrate the following:

The majority of educational organizations are micro-organizations with the average number of employees of up to 6. A part of employees work on 0.25 or 0.5 wage (half pay); organizations attract a wide circle of volunteers or temporary employees. About 1/4 of the initiatives studied during this research are not registered, but exist as stable communities.

Among the most influential and well-known organizations, it is possible to define three directions:

- Methodical support to teachers (informal courses, platforms for interaction);
- Educational projects;
- Associations and organizations that help civic initiatives.

The research did not find any organization specialized in pre-school education.

The structure of interactions is quite dynamical. Although the foundation of interactions is built by the community of NGOs, which exists for not less than a decade, new organizations can often occupy the role of central figures in these network interactions. It is attested by the fact that out of TOP-10 influential initiatives (as for the number of connections) four initiatives were created rather recently (up to 5 years of existence). It is possible to note the growth of the role of private schools that actively cooperate among themselves and are part of the methodical community of organizations of different types.

¹⁰ Educational initiatives in Belarus: a map of interactions (2021). <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14L9JmKPyFPJGsj-enFeDNH2ebazZDuIsX2pSMvDAnG/edit>

Though there are not many public educational organizations, the majority of them have joint projects with others. All respondents marked that they have working connections with other educational initiatives and projects. About 70% of the studied organizations have interconnections with others. Isolated within the ambit of educational projects are the organizations for whom educational projects are indirect activities. Only 20% of the studied organizations have interconnections in communities of initiatives where there are simultaneously 3 or more organizations.

The majority of organizations and initiatives are concentrated in Minsk. Thus, despite the small quantity of organizations in regions, they often remain isolated and do not cooperate with other organizations of their town or region.

Educators underline the following needs:

- A small total of educational initiatives, particularly outside of the capital. Thus, there is a need in various organizations: in the field of civic education, alternative higher and additional education, interdisciplinary projects, educational and cultural establishments, etc.;
- The absence of platforms for communication between organizations; the impossibility to get united in order to solve problems;
- The absence of associations, really working trade unions in the field of education;
- The need to facilitate interactions, to build communication between different initiatives;
- Want of the infrastructure: research centers, accelerators, think tanks.

These lines of activity could become one of directions of the education policy when there are changes in the internal policy of Belarus.

Initiatives after the 2020 election

The summer of 2021 can be considered the end of the “thaw” stage and of the gradual development of educational initiatives. Almost all non-state non-commercial educational organizations registered in Belarus were liquidated by the state. The reaction of educational organizations was different.

Some of them stopped their activity. For example, the Goethe Institute entirely suspended its activity in Belarus. The students’ association “Association of Belarusian Students” could not continue its work because almost all active members were imprisoned and recognized “prisoners of conscience”.

A part of organizations continued their activity on-line or in a limited format. For example, Flying University and SYMPA, which used to offer on-line and off-line education, concentrated on remote programs.

The mass liquidation touched informal non-registered communities (e.g. informal methodical communities of teachers) less. However, without support from infrastructural organizations (e.g. platforms for interaction, sponsors), their possibilities of activity and influence are considerably limited.

Simultaneously, it is possible to observe the formation of other initiatives (usually informal ones) that try to solve topical problems. For example, initiatives aimed at helping the repressed students; initiatives aimed at discussing possible reforms and changes; support foundations. However, the gathering and analysis of statistical data anent the organizations (how many of them suspended their activity and how many of them continue their work) is almost impossible now.

Development of the sector of research centers in Belarus in 2015–2020

Natallia Rabava

Sector Overview

The sector of independent think tanks is part of the civil society in Belarus. These are about 20 organizations, from one-man-organization to centers with dozens of employees. There are few large ones, so an “average” think tank during this period will be an organization of several experts and several administrative staff members.¹

The boom of “birth” of independent think tanks fell approximately on 2012–2014. Until that time, there were few think tanks, but it was during these years that, firstly, there were many more of them, and secondly, those organizations appeared or were institutionalized, which later became the “flagships” of the sector.

In 2015–2020, the sector developed intensively. Several new organizations appeared, the existing ones generally grew and specialized more clearly in a particular area of expertise. Pact’s support was important: it greatly contributed to the development of many of the centers, as well as to the formation of the sector as a whole. Pact’s withdrawal from the support of the sector in 2017 had a serious impact on the financial condition of some organizations in the sector.

The problem of the customer was partially solved: the centers began to understand what audience they worked for and began to focus more on the needs of the target groups, and not on “self-order”; however, this cooperation, as further events of 2020–2021 showed, did not become systemic and sustainable.

¹ At the beginning of 2021, Global Go To Think Tank Index Report of the University of Pennsylvania listed 32 research centers in Belarus (in the previous 5 years they were 21–22). Since the composition of these 32 is unknown, it should be assumed that they also contain inactive centers.

In addition to the think tanks themselves, there are also studies that are produced by other civil society organizations, they will not be touched upon in this review.

The main trends of this period:

- the activity of the sector in comparison with the earlier period has become more professional and visible;
- oligopolization of the sector in the period after Pact's departure in 2017: larger and more sustainable centers with institutional support became larger and more stable, smaller ones "remained where they were";
- cooperation with the state: not all, but many organizations began to work more closely with state bodies; those, in turn, also became less wary of independent think tanks; platforms for such interaction appeared or developed – for example, the Kastrychnitsa Economic Forum, the Internet Governance Forum, etc. Think tanks have become more involved in public discussions. However, this trend ended with the political crisis of 2020;
- research topics have become wider (new topics have come into use) and deeper;
- interaction with the media has expanded: joint media projects, blogs and video blogs, series of publications, etc. have appeared.

The main organizations of the sector

During the period under review, BEROC grew intensively, being engaged, in addition to its main economic specialization, in many related topics (green economy, circular economy, etc.). It was active in education, participated in international research, and published books. The center was the leader in the number of studies in the period under review and even received recognition at the international level: it became 78th (out of 109) in the regional sub-rating of research organizations in Central and Eastern Europe (before that, not a single center from Belarus was present in this rating).

The IPM Think Tank organized the aforementioned Kastrychnitsa Economic Forum (KEF) (since 2013), where quite high-ranking Belarusian and international officials spoke, organized a series of regional KEFs and published the Index of Regions' Competitiveness Index. The Center produced working papers, the IPM index, forecasts, and studies based on the population and business field data collected for it. Many of these field data were placed in the public domain, which allowed them to be analyzed by anyone.

The Minsk Dialogue – although not currently perceived as an independent center – was considered independent during the period described, with some limitations. The project emerged as an independent expert initiative in 2017, producing research and holding events on the topics of international relations, and was registered as an institution in 2019. The flagship event of the initiative is the Minsk Dialogue forum, which has been organized since 2017, at the peak of its heyday, in 2018–2019, gathered up to 700 participants and Lukashenko as the main speaker. The Center also organized other expert events, published reports, studies and analytics.

BISS at the beginning of the period under review (in 2016–2017) led the Reform project, which was an attempt to create proposals for reforming various areas of public life. In 2017–2018 the organization was going through a crisis and reformatting, a change in leadership and research focus towards the study of issues of identity and values.

The Center for European Transformation (part of the structure of the international consortium “EuroBelarus”) during these years produced research and held events on topics related to civil society, transformation processes, education, culture, etc. In 2020, the Center was engaged in research that provided an operational understanding of the opinions and actions of the actively protesting part of society.

The expert network “Our Opinion” published 200–250 analytical articles every year on various topics (political processes, public administration, economics, social, cultural, gender and other policies). Under the auspices of the website, the Belarusian Yearbook was published every year with an analysis of the dynamics in key sectors of the country’s socio-political life.

BIPART published research on various aspects of public administration, conducted educational and monitoring activities, and held several conferences.

The Institute of Political Studies “Political Sphere” has published studies, held conferences and events, including several International Congresses of Belarusian Studies. The congress was held in Kaunas, Vilnius, and Warsaw. In 2018, there was an attempt to hold this Congress in Minsk, but eventually it was not successful. Since 2019, the Congresses have been again held in Lithuania (there was no Congress in 2020 due to the pandemic). The Center also published the yearbook “Homo Historicus” and the journal Belarusian Political Science Review.

The Belarus Security Blog published studies and analytics on the topic of security, as well as published a draft law, and organized events. For some time, the Center produced video reviews, a digest and a radio program “Warta”.

The Center for New Ideas became noticeable in 2018, published the forecast “Index of the Future of Belarus” and the Rating of Belarusian Cities, analytics, infographics, videos and podcasts, held several notable Re-shape conferences. Since 2020 it has been a think tank.

The Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies produced studies and also attempted to sell “closed” reports and studies on topics of security and international relations.

The Strategy Think Tank and the Mizes Center annually participated in the development of the National Business Platform and the evaluation of the performance of past platforms, held educational events, published analytical materials and books.

Think tanks were also active, which were not registered in Belarus and worked mainly from abroad, but had Belarus as one of their focuses: CASE Belarus, EAST. Their materials are published mainly in English.

For some time, other centers were also active, which by the end of the period under review had already ceased their activities: the Ostrogorsky Center (it was active until 2020, publishing a journal, research and holding conferences), the Liberal Club (it was active until 2020), the Center for European Studies.

Independent sociology, given the ever-deteriorating working conditions “in the field”, concentrated on the work in the Internet. Thus, the Baltic Internet Policy Initiative has been and is actively working now, conducting measurements, surveys and other quantitative studies of the Internet audience in cooperation with or on behalf of various organizations.

In 2015–2016, the voices of independent think tanks with a pro-government stance (Imkhoclub platform, Citadel project) became louder. However, later, after the repressions against pro-Russian activists in 2017, their activity decreased.

Collaboration between think tanks and with other actors

Interaction between organizations in the sector often took place on the basis of personal contacts, history of creation or common interests. At the Pact initiative, the Belarus Research Council was created back in 2012 and several ratings of think tanks were issued (the last one was in 2016, 14 centers participated in it). Later this initiative, with the curtailment of Pact, ceased to exist, and a new attempt of consolidation was made at the end of 2020, already at the initiative of the organizations themselves. At the beginning of 2021, the establishment of the Belarusian Association of Think Tanks was announced.

As noted above, cooperation with the state developed well during the period under review, although unevenly: some organizations developed it more successfully and made it their priority, others less successfully. Some organizations terminated relations with the public sector after the events of the summer of 2020, and some after the liquidation of NGOs in 2021.

Think tanks actively increased their cooperation with the media, civil society organizations and political actors. For example, from 2017 to the present, the Press Club has been organizing expert events within the Expert Analytical Club (moderated in accordance with the rules of Chatham House).

2020 and beyond

The year 2020 and 2021 that followed have changed a lot for the sector, as well as for civil society in Belarus as a whole. Both the covid-19 pandemic and the political crisis had an impact. Due to the pandemic, public events and in-person training have become impossible, but the sector has mastered remote work and online events. The pandemic and the state's response to it have also become a separate object for analysis.

Paradoxically, in 2020 – the year of coronavirus and crisis, the research sector as a whole produced more research than a year earlier. But it became even more concentrated: BEROCC alone released about 2/3 of all the studies that year.

The political crisis has led to pressure on some centers, which in 2021 has already become widespread. Along with the research sector, partners have also been persecuted: the media, other CSOs, and political actors.

The sector took a limited part in the events of 2020: some centers signed various letters against violence or in support of one of the political actors. Some experts in their personal capacity advised either political actors or CSOs and local (court-yard) initiatives that were booming during that period. However, in 2021 in Belarus, almost all registered independent think tanks have either been liquidated or are in the process of liquidation, and many experts have left Belarus. Only those centers that were closely connected with state bodies and supported the policy of the authorities during the political crisis avoided persecution.

Due to the repressions of 2020 and especially 2021, the organizational capacity of both individual organizations and the sector as a whole has been seriously affected. Organizations have lost some people (repressions, fear/inability to work and burnout for those who stayed in Belarus, internal conflicts, outflow to more “safe” sectors), the infrastructure of work in Belarus, and experienced problems

with management processes, fundraising, planning, access to information and other aspects of the activities of organizations.

Conducting research became more difficult: there were problems with field work; access to many groups of respondents for interviews and surveys has worsened (and in some cases completely closed), the level of fear among respondents has increased, etc. In general, communication with stakeholders in Belarus has become problematic, various kinds of wariness and fear have increased, including the fear of visiting even online-events, read media and telegram channels recognized by the authorities as extremist, containing comments and opinions of experts, etc.

The political crisis in Belarus has attracted international attention to the country, and various international structures that have not previously been involved in Belarus or have hardly been involved in Belarus have also joined in the study of what was happening. Starting from the end of 2020, Chatham House has been conducting a series of online surveys of residents of Belarusian cities (author – Ryhor Astapenya), which is a monitoring of attitudes towards the political crisis and assessments of the socio-political situation in Belarusian society. Think tanks dealing primarily with international relations, security, and political science, have experienced an increase in international attention, while those dealing with other topics, to a lesser extent.

Conclusions

The think tanks sector experienced some “downfall” years in 2015–2020, then flourishing and so far the best years in 2018–2019. and partly in 2020 Then this development was dramatically interrupted by the political crisis which began in Belarus in 2020 and continues to this day. During this period, think tanks “lost” several organizations, however, they also acquired new ones; became more productive and professional, expanded cooperation with other stakeholders, and even had a generally good relationship with the state. In 2020 and later, the centers have experienced mass repressions and the closure of organizations in Belarus. Now the centers are in an unstable position and work mainly from abroad, without access to many stakeholders and data.

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The youth sector in Belarus: from leisure and education to political activism

Lavon Marozau

Quantitative characteristics of the youth sector in Belarus

According to statistics for 2021, in Belarus, there are 1,921.07 thousand people aged 14–30, Belarusian youth is characterized by a high level of literacy (99.8%). However, there is a downward trend in the share of young people in the total population: from 2005 to 2018, this share has decreased from 27.0% to 20.2%, and consequently, the potential number of participants in youth organizations is also decreasing.

The youth involved in the educational process is 1,462.9 thousand people, of which 268.1 thousand people receive higher education at the first stage, and at the second stage – 14.7 thousand people (298 students per 10 thousand population) in 51 institutions of higher education.

According to a study by the Center for European Transformation, in 2015, there were 327 youth groups and organizations in Belarus, of which 80% (262) were registered, 10% were not registered, and another 10% existed in an “unclear status”¹. At the same time, only 16 organizations are in the Republican register of youth and children’s associations which receive state support.²

The state policy towards youth organizations can be easily described by comparing two facts. According to media reports, funding from the republican budget

¹ The potential for interaction between youth civic organizations and initiatives in addressing common issues. Секторальный анализ / Под общ. ред. А. Егорова // Центр европейской трансформации. – 15.01.2016: https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2015_Youth-NGOs-Belarus_RU-OEEC.pdf

² Республиканский реестр молодежных и детских объединений, пользующихся государственной поддержкой // <https://edu.gov.by/sistema-obrazovaniya/upr-molodezhi/obedineniya/reestr/>

for the main youth GONGO – the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) – in 2021 was increased to 9.273 million rubles.³ At the same time, the main independent opponent of the pro-state BRYU, the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, was deprived of registration in 2006 by the decision of the Supreme Court of Belarus, after which it was forced to operate in the country in the semi-legal way.

Main developments and trends in 2015–2020

In 2015, independent political youth organizations saw “participation in elections as work for the future” as one of their main tasks.⁴ However, for the most part, youth organizations of the sector distance themselves from political parties and initiatives, with the exception of several organizations with a political or human rights “history”, but they also do not deal with parties, but only with their youth “wings” (such as: “Moladz BNF” – Youth of the Belarusian Popular Front, “Mala-diya Satsial-Demokraty – Maladaya Hramada” – Young Social-Democrats MSD-MG), and “Molodiye Demokraty OGP” – Young Democrats).

Many youth organizations in the described period interacted with government bodies at the local level, however, mainly in the mode of coordination or obtaining permission to carry out activities, hold events, etc. In 2015–2019, more freedom was noted for the implementation of youth initiatives of an educational, awareness-raising or entertaining nature in the field of “safe” topics. Organizations of the democratic sector are in no way included in the formation of youth policy and decision-making at the level of legislation in this area.

As of 2015, 3 pro-state unions (associations) of civic organizations of youth orientation were registered in Belarus: the Republican Union of Civic Associations “Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations” (RSOO “BKMO”), the International Association of Youth Civic Organizations of Firefighters and Rescuers (UNSPAS) and the International Union of Civic Associations “RBSM” (Russian-Belarusian Youth Union)⁵ actively supporting the existing regime.

³ Финансирование БРСМ из республиканского бюджета увеличится в 2021 году // REFORM.by, <https://reform.by/188278-finansirovanie-brsm-iz-respublikanskogo-bjuzheta-uvelichitsja-v-2021-godu>

⁴ Оппозиционная молодежь Беларуси: цель участия в выборах – работа на будущее | Беларусь: взгляд из Европы – спецпроект DW | DW | 24.03.2015 // <https://www.dw.com/ru/оппозиционная-молодежь-беларуси-цель-участия-в-выборах-работа-на-будущее/a-18335011>

⁵ О положении молодежи в Республике Беларусь в 2015 году (национальный доклад) // <https://youthworker.by/images/normativnie%20dokumenti/Doklad%20o%20polozhenii%20molodezhi%20v%202015%20godu.pdf>

In 2018, experts within the civil sector believed that there were about a hundred active and really working youth organizations in the country. The most famous in the sector were: NGO “Youth Educational Center “Fialta”, Student Council “Studentskaya Rada”, Youth Initiative – Association of Belarusian Students (registered as “Office for disseminating information about the theory of the Bologna process “Philomaty”), “Voluntary Labor of Youth Ligue”, “Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs”, “New Faces”, Brotherhood of Student Self-Government Organizers (BOSS), “Office for Promoting Initiatives”, project “It is Cool to be Active” (“Aktyunym byt’ Faina”)⁶.

The history and education civic organization “Dzeya”, established in 2017, was rapidly gaining popularity, as was the Youth Labor Rights organization founded in early 2018 (“YularConsult” Youth Employment Assistance and Support Office). Particular attention should be given to the existing student associations: the European Law Students Association in Belarus (ELSA Belarus), the Belarusian Association of Architecture Students (BASA), etc., as well as the umbrella organization – the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, which for the first time in 2019 prepared the first Youth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for the UN Human Rights Council, and is also actively involved in the work of the European Youth Forum.

Despite the fact that most of the organizations were concentrated in Minsk, youth activity also developed in the regions, mainly, of course, at the level of regional centers, the most dynamic processes were noted in Vitebsk, Brest, Homiel, and Mogilev. Sustainable regional organizations include: NGO “Center for Information Support of Public Initiatives “Third Sector” (Hrodna), Regional Development Agency “Dzedzich” (Brest), NGO “Homiel Association of Children and Youth” (ASDEMO) (Homiel), “Vitebsk for me” (Vitebsk4Me) (Vitebsk), the project “It is Cool to be Active” (ABF), which has regional branches in Brest, Homiel, and Hrodna, worked actively at the regional level.

Unfortunately, after August 2020, almost all these organizations, despite the non-political nature of their activities, were subjected to pressure from the authorities to one degree or another and are now in a different state of activity.

⁶ Гражданское общество Беларуси: актуальное состояние и условия развития (2015–2017), с.53 // <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2018/10/11/grazhdanskoe-obschestvo-belarusi-aktual-noe-sostoyanie-i-1810110900.html>

Joint work of youth organizations

As rightly noted in the study “Civil Society in Belarus: Current State and Conditions for Development”⁷, although few new organizations in the period 2015–2017 were registered, a large number of initiatives appeared which, for one reason or another, did not seek to be registered and formalized.

It can be noted that until the end of 2020, the agenda of youth organizations remained very broad: from education and ecology to student rights and youth policy. The important events of that time were the holding of the RADA FORUM conference in 2016, 2017, 2018⁸, which was the first attempt after a long break to organize a common strategic “platform” in the sector, as well as the establishment of the “RADA AWARDS” for youth initiatives and the ground of the first regional award “Hramadska padzyaka” in Vitebsk.

In general, youth organizations throughout this period have declared a high interest in cooperation, but it manifested itself more in support of signature initiatives and joint participation in events than in more sustainable forms. The situation partly changed in 2020 after the creation, by the initiative of the activists of the “Belarusian Student Association”, of the “Youth Bloc” – an association of young activists, some of whom, after the presidential elections in Belarus in 2020, were either arrested or forced to leave Belarus.

Participation in the events of 2020

The most active role on the eve of the elections was played by activists from the Youth Bloc, who indicated their presence “on the streets” of Minsk already in May, by a performance when a coffin was carried along Independence Avenue, indicating their reaction to the lack of anti-epidemiological measures and the celebrating of the 9th of May parade.

In August-September 2020, young activists, including students of Belarusian universities, showed very high protest activity not only during street demonstrations, but also within the walls of educational institutions, including those in the regions, the evidence and consequence of which was the number of dismissed,

⁷ Гражданское общество Беларуси: актуальное состояние и условия развития (2015–2017) // <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2018/10/11/grazhdanskoe-obschestvo-belarusi-aktual-noe-sostoyanie-i-1810110900.html>

⁸ RADA – Belarusian National Youth RADA // <https://en.rada.fm/>

expelled, and arrested activists⁹. The fact that in 2020 the scholarship holders, laureates, prize winners and diploma holders of the Special Fund of the President of the Republic of Belarus for the Support of Talented Youth and Gifted Students and Pupils in 2020 renounced the title and all privileges can also be considered a manifestation of civic position.¹⁰

According to the student organization ZBS, 15 student strike committees were created in 4 cities of Belarus, with a total number of members of 98.5 thousand people.

The beginning of the academic year 2020 was also remembered by the mass movement of students to leave the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (a pro-state youth organization). Prior to this, the facts of the forced accession of pupils and students into this organization have been known,¹¹ forced financial contributions to this organization¹², as well as the refusal of the administration of the Belarusian State Economic University to accept the student's intention to voluntarily leave the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, despite the existence of a constitutional provision (Article 36)¹³.

Besides, it is worth noting the brutal detentions of students and teachers in the buildings of universities in the fall of 2020. So, on September 1, 2020, special police officers called by the vice-rector himself worked at the Minsk State Linguistic University and in the building of the Belarusian National Technical University. Similar operations were held at the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics, sit-in protests were held at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of BSU and the Faculty of Applied Mathematics and Informatics of BSU. Students and teachers of the Belarusian State Academy of Music signed an appeal to the leadership of the Academy demanding Lukashen-

⁹ On September 1, in Vitebsk, young people gathered near the university. Several people were detained | Vitebsk Courier news (vkurier.info) // <https://vkurier.info/1-sentyabrya-v-vitebske-molodezh-sobralas-vozle-vgu-im-p-m-mashero-va-za-derzhano-neskolko-chelovek/>

¹⁰ One hundred winners of the scholarship of the President of Belarus refused to receive awards // <https://www.interfax.ru/world/721825>

¹¹ «Вы супраць палітыкі прэзыдэнта?» Менскія школьнікі запісалі на відэа, як іх заганяюць у БРСМ (svaboda.org) // <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29573437.html>

¹² Студэнт пытаецца выйці з БРСМ і вернуць членскія взносы: Но не так-то это просто – The Village Беларусь (the-village.me) // <https://www.the-village.me/village/city/news-city/275935-brsm>

¹³ «Ня ганьбі мяне». Дэкан не ўхваляў выхаду студэнткі з БРСМ. АЎДЫЁ (svaboda.org) // <https://www.svaboda.org/a/29604052.html>

ka's resignation, an end to violence, the release of political prisoners, and new elections.¹⁴

Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA" made a statement against pressure on youth and youth organizations in Belarus¹⁵. In addition, the "Association of Belarusian Students", together with the Student Initiative Group, collected evidence of 415 detained students, 135 facts of expulsions¹⁶. Youth NGOs adopted a Statement against the pressure on the student movement and teachers in Belarus.¹⁷ According to the Telegram channel "Studenskaya Dumka", as of November 3, 2020, Belarusian universities terminated labor relations with 15 teachers.¹⁸

According to the "Honest University" project for February 2021, "490 students asked for help. These are only those who suffered from the pressure of the administration: they were expelled for civic activism, received reprimands or remarks, were deprived of a scholarship or a place in a student dormitory, 131 students were expelled and 23 people became suspects in criminal cases."

Representatives of youth NGOs, as well as the Belarusian human rights coalition, continue to demand the urgent release of politically imprisoned students and teachers¹⁹. At the beginning of 2022, there were more than 400 young political prisoners in Belarus.

In conclusion, it can be noted that after August 2020, the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA described the situation and prepared two international document on youth rights – the Universal Periodic Review on the rights of Belarusian youth to the UN Human Rights Council, as well as an alternative report on youth rights to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in which one can see the overall deteriorating dynamics in the Belarusian youth sector.

¹⁴ Студенты и преподаватели БГАМ требуют отставки Лукашенко / Мой ВУ – Информационный портал Беларуси. Новости Беларуси (moyby.com) // <https://www.moyby.com/news/407329/>

¹⁵ РАДА – Заява "РАДА" супраць ціску на моладзь і моладзевыя арганізацыі Беларусі – РАДА (rada.fm) // <https://rada.fm/2020/11/19/zayava-rada-2/>

¹⁶ Ціск на студэнцтва 2020 (zbsunion.by) // https://zbsunion.by/news/pressure_on_students

¹⁷ РАДА – Заява РАДА супраць ціску на студэнцкі рух і выкладчыкаў і выкладчыц у Беларусі – РАДА (rada.fm) // <https://rada.fm/2020/11/02/statement/>

¹⁸ Студэнцкая думка – Telegram // <https://t.me/s/dumkame>

¹⁹ Паграбуем неадкладнага вызвалення палітзняволеных студэнтаў і выкладчыц БДУІР – Human Rights House Foundation // <https://humanrightshouse.org/statements/27540/>

EcoNGOs in 2015–2020: tendencies and achievements it is important to preserve

Marina Dubina

In 2015–2020, the sector of environmental organizations did not increase much and continued to remain not numerous – about 20 most active organizations, which activity is visible and presented in the public field (such as Belarusian Birds Protection, Environmental Solutions Center, Bagna, Ecoproject, Ecopartnership, Interaction, EcoHome, Minsk Bicycle Society, Nieruš, bicycle communities in regions [For Bicycle Brest, Bicycle Hrodna] and others).

However, it is necessary to notice that there appeared several new regional organizations. Thus, in 2015, in Brest, the association “Time of the Earth” was registered; until the period of «cleansing» the civil sector in 2021, it had carried out its vigorous activity; “Ecomonitoring” was registered in Hrodna. Also, there was a growth of new GoNGOs¹, working in the environmental sphere, which were created in order to receive grant support and which successfully received financing within the framework of programs of the United Nations Development Program and the European Union.

At the same time, if before 2018 there had been a visible active development of the network of public inspectors “Green Patrol” that had worked with regional activists and initiatives, then, unfortunately, later, this activity practically came to naught. A number of activists who appeared within the pale of the initiative «Green Patrol» continue their environmental activity, but rather as independent activists or under the aegis of other organizations.

¹ A government-organized non-governmental organization (GoNGO) is a state-run non-governmental organization that was set up or sponsored by a government in order to further its political interests and mimic the civic groups and civil society at home, or promote its international or geopolitical interests abroad.

According to the research “Civil society of Belarus: today’s condition and development conditions”² carried out in 2017 by the European Transformation Center and Lawtrend, in 2012–2013 there was a considerable growth in the environmental sector, «however, by 2018, the sector reached a certain “plateau”». This tendency continued until 2020; there was no visible growth of the number of organizations; the activity of the existing organizations remained the same. Except for quantity indicators, it is necessary to underline the increase of the professional and expert potential of EcoNGOs and the quality of their influence on environmental questions.

For example, thanks to the work of the Environmental Solutions Center, in 2021 the Council of Ministers issued an order interdicting the use and sale of some kinds of disposable tableware in public catering institutions. Ecoproject and Ecopartnership helped more than fifty cities in Belarus join the Mayors’ Agreement on the climate and energy. Bagna, together with other eco-organizations, convinced the European Reconstruction and Development Bank to refuse its support to the construction of Waterway E40. Belarusian Birds Protection helped to increase the area of the zakaznik [*a kind of a nature reserve*] «Almanskija Baloty» [*Almany Swamps*] by 10%.

The increase of the number of and the growth of activity of initiatives

Recently, there has been a considerable growth of the interest in environmental topics promoted by a number of activists who oppose the activity that can make a negative impact on the environment. Among such initiatives, it is possible to mention the initiative in Brest and the Brest Voblaść [*Region*], which since 2018 opposes the construction and activity of the Battery Factory; the initiatives in Minsk aimed at protecting the Hrušaŭka Garden Square and the Asmałoŭka Microdistrict, at preserving the Katoŭka Garden Square in the Microdistrict called “Agricultural Settlement”; “Sludge ponds under control” (inhabitants struggle against the stench from the silt farm “Volma”); the campaign in Śvietlahorsk against the work of the Bleached Pulp Factory, and many others. These initiative groups do not always get institutionalized; they are usually formed around one concrete problem and question. Thus, it is important to notice that

2 Civil society of Belarus: today’s condition and development conditions (2015–2017) // <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2018/10/11/grazhdanskoe-obschestvo-belarusi-aktual-noe-sostoyanie-i-1810110900.html>

activists from different initiatives start to cooperate among themselves, to share their experiences, and to advise other inhabitants, groups.

The essential role in the growth of these initiative groups was played by the development and popularity of social networks; initiatives created their chats, channels, and pages in social networks in order to disseminate the information and became more visible. Thus, the mass media also began to pay more attention to environmental themes, which led to the awareness growth. As a result, other inhabitants can find much easier not only the information on environmental problems, but also see the experiences of the already existing initiative groups. It allowed them not to be afraid and to get engaged in environmental questions; environmental activities became more visible.

Even if the political context in Belarus had not changed, it would hardly be necessary to expect any increase of the number of eco-organizations because the existing tendencies conduct more likely to a fall of the demand for formalized structures and the growth of non-formalized initiatives. Thus, there are more and more demands for expertise – in order to receive it these initiatives address to EcoNGOs. Probably, in the future, the role of EcoNGOs will change – they may become ExpertNGOs. However, under the conditions of high uncertainty, it is difficult to predict which tendencies remain.

Popularity of the topic of the eco-friendly way of life

Such topics as: separate collection of waste, eco-friendly way of life, ecological and organic products are paid more and more attention to and become a trend. On the one hand, the young generation pays more attention to its habits and way of life; on the other hand, Belarus follows the global trends. It is interesting that if in initiative groups that oppose the construction of harmful manufactures the activists are basically people of more adult age (35+), then the topic of the eco-friendly way of life is usually a trend basically among teenagers and youth of 15–20 years old.

Answering to the increased interest in this topic, environmental organizations developed new lines of activity (e.g. the charitable project “Kalilaska”, «Meal Bank – Food», the initiative «My cup, please»); there were also new initiatives (the project «Plogging Belarus», “New life in exchange for lids”, the festival of environmental cinema “Planetarium“, «Banana Van»), including commercial ones («Zerro», “Pasternak”, «Zero Waste Market»), etc.

There was an essential growth of the interest in the activity in the question of bicycle topics, arrangement of the bicycle infrastructure (paths, parking lots), discussions of vital topics and problems of the bicycle movement. It happened partly thanks to the popularization of the use of bicycles as a whole, but also thanks to the work of bicycle organizations and communities, especially Minsk Bicycle Society, Bicycle Hrodna, For Bicycle Brest, and their implementation of their big project “City Bicycle Movement in Belarus” in 2017–2020.

Also, there was a growth of the representation of the environmental theme in the mass media (coverage of environmental problems, popularization of the eco-friendly way of life, bicycle infrastructure, wild nature, etc.); the audience of the «Green Portal», specializing in eco-subjects, increased as well.

Local communities and provision of urban amenities

“Inhabitants of the Zachodni Microdistrict in Babrujsk organized a holiday of their community and beautified their district”. “Inhabitants and activists organized a children’s holiday in the Katoŭka Garden Square and worked out a recreational development plan of the Garden Square”. “Inhabitants of Sierabranka can vote for the best sketch project of a recreational development plan of their microdistrict.” These are only several out of numerous examples when inhabitants themselves or together with organizations demonstrated their active interest in the topic of provision of urban amenities. The demand for participation in the arrangement of districts and interaction among local communities grows.

Corporate social responsibility of business

Environmental actions and events became a new trend in the activity of commercial organizations; this trend was sometimes spurred by head offices of international companies, but local organizations also started to pay more attention to the eco-topic. Some companies want to satisfy the demands of their employees and organize «green offices» and bicycle parking lots, for example. Another motivation is to promote one’s activity, including in the mass media with the help of eco-actions (planting of trees, cleaning of garbage (e.g. Business Network, Epam)). Still, at the same time, it is important to underline such conceptual approaches as the working-out of the Environmental Policy by separate organizations (e.g. A1).

The trend of interactions of eco-organizations and initiatives with businesses became more and more visible in 2015–2020; many commercial organizations used it in their marketing purposes, which is inherent in the formation stage. In

the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic strongly affected the financial possibilities of small and medium businesses that had traditionally been the most active in and open to joint activity and projects. Companies re-oriented their resources to help people in the struggle against the coronavirus; then the political situation in the country affected everybody. Many large companies began to relocate completely or partially; the development of corporate social responsibility stopped being a priority.

Interaction with the state structures

Organizations say that until 2020 there was a growth of work with city administrations, district executive committees; such interactions were approved at the state level; joint projects were implemented. It happened thanks to the fact that the Paris Agreement and Mayors' Agreement were accepted. It created good dynamics in the advancement of the topic of climate change questions.

Also, thanks to the previous work of EcoNGOs and the growth of the awareness of environmental themes, there appeared an interest in questions of wild nature, sustainable consumption and manufacture, quality of air and water. The demand for these themes was present in the independent and state-run mass media because, *inter alia*, they are perceived as conflict-free and non-politicized.

Coordination and interaction of EcoNGOs

Traditionally, environmental organizations organized forums of EcoNGOs, which were a platform to discuss vital topics, to develop joint approaches, to coordinate positions, and to synchronize activities. The last, fifth, Forum took place in 2017. When the association «Green Alliance» worked actively, it was them who aimed at building closer interaction and cooperation among eco-organizations; nowadays this function is carried out by nobody.

As of today, environmental organizations get united to solve individual questions and if necessary. Vivid examples are the joint campaign against the construction of Waterway E40, “Zrobim” (a campaign to clean unapproved dumps and garbage), «My cup, please» (the movement to use re-usable mugs). Examples of the work aimed at introducing changes into legislation: a law on organic agriculture, on protection and use of bogs (peatlands), a campaign against the Decree «About the order of freeing legal bodies, including individual businessmen, from the need to compensate the damage caused to the environment, the cost of illegally extracted production».

Basically, organizations cooperate at a personal level, ask each other for expertise, and publish joint statements and appeals. But it is impossible to call the level of cooperation in the sector high. Probably, the reason is that the number of such organizations is small, while their activity is thematically different and complementary. Thus, the organizations themselves notice that there is want of platforms and forms of joint discussions, support, and activity synchronization.

Influence of the 2020 events

After the events in 2020–2021 (the cleansing of the civil sector, waves of searches, checks, criminal cases against environmental activists and organizations, liquidation of organizations), many EcoNGOs were faced with the question of a possibility of continuing their activity, of searching for new formats of work, and of maintaining connections with their target groups. Since the beginning of 2021, about 50 EcoNGOs have been compulsorily liquidated or forced to self-liquidation.

The 2020 events have radically affected the sector and activity of environmental organizations. It has to do with the question of interaction with businesses, a possibility of covering eco-topics in the mass media when the absolutely different agenda is topical and the independent mass media are recognized extremist by the authorities; burning-out, frustration, and fear of repressions. The launched tendencies and achievements of the work during the previous years are destroyed today.

After their liquidation, some EcoNGOs stopped their activity completely; some continue their activity and seek for new forms of their existence. Representatives of organizations are faced with new questions and challenges, including how much ethical it is to be engaged in the environmental theme when the fundamental human rights and freedoms are being violated by the Belarusian authorities. Some organizations reconsidered their approaches to the work with the state structures; some activities were suspended; some other – cancelled at all. Still, it is clear that some kinds of activity cannot be carried out without the interaction with the state structures. The environmental problems and questions have not disappeared anywhere, and it is understood that a number of problems, especially the questions of preserving wild nature, vanishing species, can have irreversible consequences if their solution is being postponed constantly.

The situation in Belarus is so unstable that it is difficult for organizations to carry out both their short-term and long-term planning. Therefore, many questions turn into tactical tasks and constant adaptations to new challenges. The Belarusian

environmental organizations are faced with not only the question of how to preserve themselves and how to carry out their activity under the current conditions, but also how to consider and adapt to European (Green Deal) and global trends (climate change questions, green economy, etc.).

It is important to mark that the above-stated description of the influence of the 2020 events may not reflect the condition of activity of separate eco-organizations, especially those from the category of GoNGOs.

The sector of social public organizations in Belarus: general tendencies and separate cases

Mikita Drachylouski

General characteristic

The sector of social and charitable organizations is traditionally considered one of the biggest ones, with diverse forms and topics of activity. Thus, as of 2018, the quantity of civil society organizations (CSOs) in this sector, which worked with social themes, was 20% out of the total number of CSOs¹.

The sector is presented by independent non-state organizations (NGOs) and a considerable quantity of state-organized non-state organizations (GoNGOs), in relation to which the state applies more loyal principles that differ from those applied with regard to independent NGOs.

It is important to understand that the basic supplier of social services in Belarus is the state. At the legislative level, the target groups of reception of such services are defined; however, CSOs are not limited by Article №28 of the Law “About social service” and consider many other people who need help to be their target groups: for example, refugees and migrants, HIV positive people, (former) military men, and others.

One more factor that had a strong impact on the sector development during this period was the increase of the number of social services rendered on a commercial basis (these are often unique, new, and independent services – e.g. education for parents of children with physical disabilities).

During the considered period, organizations that work with topics, which had not been covered before, began to appear: the social-educational institution «Oncological Patients Support Center “For Life”» (improvement of oncological

¹ Aksana Shelest, Andrei Yahorau, Olga Smolyanko. Civil society of Belarus: today's condition and development conditions, Minsk, 2018. The report on the research results – p. 13.

patients' quality of life); the social-educational institution «International Center "Donorship. Dialysis. Transplantation"»; the educational private institution "Center of problems of children's development "Levania" (inclusiveness in education), etc².

Among other visible events in 2015–2020, it is possible to mention the growth of the number of registered establishments in this sector, as well as a number of successful attempts of rapprochement/cooperation of organizations of the sector.

Interaction with the state structures

The social sector, just like any other sector of CSOs in Belarus, depends much on the general legal, political, and other conditions defined by the state. The legal environment for CSOs in Belarus had not been favorable before 2020, either³; however, the attitude of the state towards the sector of social services was softer than, for example, towards the sector of human rights protection and other sectors. The Belarusian state used the possibilities of this sector in the granting and monitoring of social services. During the considered period, some official bodies "adopted" the rendering of separate types of services that had been rendered for the first time by CSOs. E.g. establishments of public health services of Babruïsk and Mahiloŭ began rendering palliative help to children with health limited possibilities on the basis of the practice applied by the public charitable organization «Belarusian Children's Hospice»⁴. In 2017, the government involved CSOs in a number of consultations: on the working-out of the National Plan of Actions aimed at implementing the provisions of the Convention on the rights of the disabled in 2017–2025 and the legally enforceable enactments that regulate the mechanism of the state order of social services in the sphere of public health services.

The procedure of the State Social Order (SSO) is described in Belarus at the legislative level. It was supposed that the SSO would unite the actions of the state, which is the basic supplier of social services, and those of CSOs, which render

² Aksana Shelest, Andrei Yavorau, Olga Smolyanko. Civil society of Belarus: today's condition and development conditions, Minsk, 2018. The report on the research results – p. 67

³ During this period, the USAID evaluated the legal environment "highly restrictive" (The 2015 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia / United States Agency for International Development; Bureau for Europe and Eurasia; Technical Support Office, Democracy and Governance Division, 2015. – p. 50).

⁴ The 2015 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia / United States Agency for International Development; Bureau for Europe and Eurasia; Technical Support Office, Democracy and Governance Division, 2015. – p. 50

such services and possess the necessary resources, would raise the efficiency of social support, and would ensure the effective interaction of the state and CSOs. However, the SSO mechanism remains inaccessible to CSOs as it works selectively and with a considerable quantity of problems: impracticable conditions, total control over the implementation, and the difficult financial regulation.

Also, it is necessary to underline that the majority of contracts aimed at rendering social services are signed by organs of state power with the organizations that have close contacts with the authorities. Moreover, GoNGOs, such as the BRSM (Belarusian National Youth Union, and other organizations loyal to the state receive direct financing from the budget on an out-of-competition basis. Only several CSOs, rendering unique services in the sphere of social service, also received the state financing (e.g. the Belarusian Association to Help Disabled Children and Young People with Disabilities, «Positive Movement»).

Advocacy

During the mentioned period, there were several effective advocacy campaigns. The most appreciable event was the ratification by Belarus in 2016 of the Convention on the rights of the disabled as a result of a successful long campaign launched by the Office for the rights of people with disabilities, the National Association of wheelchair users, the Belarusian Society of the disabled, and other CSOs. Also, thanks to the efforts of the organizations from this sector, the Law on social services expanded the list of social services rendered to people with physical disabilities, and HIV-positive people received an opportunity to become foster parents and guardians. Also, as a consequence of the acceptance of the Convention, during this period, there happened a gradual change in the perception of and the activity aimed at people with disabilities – from guardianship (wardship) to inclusiveness (inclusion).

Three stories

It is very difficult to describe the sector of social organizations “as a whole” because of its diversity and heterogeneity. To illustrate the sector development tendencies, in this article, we shall present three cases, three organizations that differ from each other by their substantial and formal signs.

Office for the rights of people with disabilities

The acceptance of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the disabled and its human rights defending character was one of the reasons why the Office for the rights of people with disabilities was created in 2010; its main objective is the advocacy of the questions of the ratification of this Convention and respective alterations in the legislation – in the organs of state power and among other organizations.

In 2015–2020, there were considerable achievements in this direction: the Ministry of Labor signed contracts of partnership with five organizations of the sector; representatives of the sector (people with disabilities) participated in the working-out of the plan of measures aimed at implementing the Convention, of a corresponding law on the rights of the disabled, and of a report on the implementation of the Convention. It is also necessary to mark the successful experience of cooperation of the CSOs sector in the writing of the Zero Report on the situation with the rights of people with disabilities in Belarus.

After Belarus ratified the Convention, the National Plan of Actions aimed at its implementation was compiled; however, it did not consider the specificity of each region. In 2017, the Office for the rights of people with disabilities together with a number of partners began implementing the campaign “Agenda-50” aimed at creating in regions their local strategies aimed at implementing the Convention. During special researches, 5 pilot territories were selected to take part in the campaign: Ščučyn, Vałožyn, Stoŭbcy, Babruisk, and Stolin. The campaign came to an end with the Regional Development Forum in 2019⁵.

As it is described in the book published as a result of the campaign, the “Agenda-50” achieved three basic results: development of communications and relations between the subjects involved in the solution of problems of people with disabilities; changes of perceptions of how to work with problems of people with disabilities (first of all, it concerns employees of state social work services); the expansion of the list of purposes (first of all, it concerns NGOs); changes of ideas of participants of the planning process – from consumers’ ones to pro-active ones⁶.

⁵ The campaign «Agenda-50» came to an end with the Regional Development Forum/The Office for the rights of people with disabilities– <https://www.disright.org/ru/news/kampaniya-povestka-50-zavershilas-forumom-regionalnogo-razvitiya>. – 21.01.2022

⁶ The process of the work on the creation of local agendas: evaluation of results//The tool of local agendas to implement the Convention on the rights of people with disabilities at the local level/M. Matskevich [and others]. – Minsk, 2019. – p. 55–60

Besides the advancement of the human rights defending agenda, the Office for the rights of people with disabilities was also engaged in the rendering of services. Thus, the Office had a public reception that worked with statements of infringements/explanation of the rights of the disabled (more than 1,000 appeals per year). The Office created and promoted innovative resources and services for people with disabilities: databases of availability, guidebooks, maps; representatives of the Office for the rights of people with disabilities rendered expert services for CSOs (trainings, seminars), as well as were engaged in the preparation of often unique research materials used by CSOs and the state structures.

In 2016, in order to continue the campaign “Deinstitutionalization” aimed at reforming the existing forms of social support, which was launched in 2013, the Office for the rights of people with disabilities together with the «Mental Health Prospects» (Lithuania) started the project «Deinstitutionalization as a possibility of advancing human rights among people with disabilities with intellectual and/or psychological disorders in Belarus»⁷. And in 2018 the Office declared the start of mini-projects within the framework of the campaign “Deinstitutionalization” in regions with different topics: support and adaptation of people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities; development of palliative services for children; development of possibilities for independent life⁸.

During the pandemic, in June 2020, the Office for the rights of people with disabilities united its efforts with the noncommercial organization “Yest Delo” [“We Do Care”] and the noncommercial charity media platform “Names” to help social workers and volunteers.

Platform “Names”

The “Names” began its activity in 2016 with the first story-report on seriously ill people, in which non-indifferent readers were asked to support financially the project that supported these ill people. For a period of time, the “Names” positioned itself as an online magazine that with the help of its reports supported other

⁷ The Office for the rights of people with disabilities begins a new stage of the campaign “Deinstitutionalization”/The Office for the rights of people with disabilities. – <https://www.disright.org/ru/news/ofis-po-pravam-lyudey-s-invalidnostyu-nachinaet-novyy-etap-kompanii-deinstitutizatsiya>. – 21.01.2022

⁸ The Office for the rights of people with disabilities declares the beginning of the implementation of mini projects within the pale of the campaign “Deinstitutionalization”/The Office for the rights of people with disabilities. – <https://www.disright.org/ru/news/ofis-po-pravam-lyudey-s-invalidnostyu-obyavlyayet-o-nachale-realizatsii-mini-proektov-v-ramkah>. – 21.01.2022

initiatives. Soon enough, the “Names” started launching its own projects together with other organizations and initiatives, e.g.: the project “Patronage Service” caring of seriously ill people together with the Saint Elisabeth Convent in Minsk (later, in 2018, the project “Patronage Service in regions” together with the Red Cross); the project “Nurse instead of Mum” to help children-orphans together with the Red Cross; the project to help the patients organization “Genom” that helps families with children and adults with rare genetic neuro-muscular diseases; and many other projects.

In 2016, the “Names” even established a national record on crowdfunding, having collected more than 20,000 dollars on the crowdfunding platform “Talaka”⁹.

In 2018, the “Names” became a platform: “The edition of the online magazine NAMES writes stories about people and social problems that must be solved; the project department is engaged in the financing of projects – it launches, implements, supports, and audits projects and develops charity services,” – says the platform web-site¹⁰.

The way the “Names” attracted means for the financing of its own team and their interaction with businesses are interesting. Among all projects, for which the platform found help and declared fund raising, it is possible to find the project under the name “Names”. All transfers that arrived within the bounds of this project went to the internal financing of the team of the platform: to pay coordinators of projects, fees, payment for IT services and all other expenses that had to do with the platform activity, i.e. the “Names” was financed as a project like all the other projects launched by this platform¹¹.

However, besides being supported by users, the “Names” built cooperation with businesses and entrepreneurs in the form of the body that provided its system financing – it was called the “Board of Guardians”. Private persons were the guardians; they gave the “Names” an annual trustee payment and they could find sponsors help, as well as rendered every month their specialized services: advertising, promotion, accounting services, etc.¹².

⁹ The 2016 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia / United States Agency for International Development; Bureau for Europe and Eurasia; Technical Support Office, Democracy and Governance Division, 2016. – p. 46

¹⁰ About Us / Names. – <https://imenamag.by/pages/about>. – 22.01.2022

¹¹ Project Names / Names. – <https://imenamag.by/projects/imena>. – 29.01.2022

¹² Guardians / Names. – <https://imenamag.by/pages/trustees>. – 29.01.2022

In total, during the investigated period, the “Names” managed to launch more than 30 successful projects, to help more than 40,000 people, and to create more than 200 workplaces in the noncommercial sector¹³.

“Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS”

Another example of the diversity of forms and activities of organizations in this sector is the association “Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS”. The association existed since 2001, being an informal union of several organizations that dealt with HIV and AIDS issues in Belarus; it was called the “Belarusian Network of HIV and AIDS”. Under the current name the Association was registered in 2007.

The “Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS” is an example of an “umbrella” organization that accumulates experiences of all organizations dealing with a concrete problem, organizes exchanges, carries out trainings and consultations for people involved in this work in the sector, renders advocacy services, carries out communication and cooperates with the state structures.

The distinctive feature of the “Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS” is that the organization is not service-based (i.e. it does not render services to target groups directly); its purpose is to create the favorable legal and social environment, to develop public associations-members.

Since 2008, every two years, the Association held the International Forum on HIV and AIDS. The first Forum was attended by heads of the offices of the United Nations and UNDP, as well as the deputy chief of the Ministry of Health. The chief executive of the “Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS” Oleg Yeriomin said that the Forum was a platform “where the state and civil society solved problems together”¹⁴.

In general, the interaction between the Association and the state was always close and existed in various forms: consultations for the state structures (first of all, public health services establishments); mass mailing of the bulletin “Together” published by the “Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS”; participation in joint activities (like, for example, the organization for employees of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and Department of Internal Affairs of visits to German places of imprisonment in order to increase the level of the procedure of the re-socialization of former prisoners); monitoring of quality of services rendered by the

¹³ Chronicle / Names. – <https://chronicle.imenamag.by>. – 22.01.2022

¹⁴ Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS: “We were always needed by the state” / REFORM.by. – <https://reform.by/258307-belset-antispid-my-vsegda-byli-nuzhny-gosudarstvu>. – 29.01.2022

state to target groups of organizations that are members of the Association; advocacy and introduction of necessary changes into the Belarusian legislation.

One more line of activity of the “Belarusian Network Anti-AIDS”, which should be mentioned, is the organization for Belarusian state employees of visits to other countries to study their experience on the HIV and AIDS preventative measures. Representatives of the Ministry of Economics, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and officials from regional executive committees took part in these visits.

P.S. During the campaign of cleansing civil society in 2020–2022, all the three organizations have been liquidated.

Networks and coalitions, joint campaigns of NGOs

Kiryl Maltsau

Networks and coalitions of organizations are important forms of cooperation inside civil society. Such structures of civil society act as platforms to share experiences, to render expert and educational support, and to attract resources for member organizations, and are a tool to consolidate efforts and to organize solidary actions, to implement joint projects and initiatives.

The degree of interaction of organizations inside thematic sectors is non-uniform. According to the linking research¹ of Belarus' civil society, covering the period of 2015–2017, the highest level of cooperation was observed among the organizations of the human rights defending sector and the sector of business associations, as well as the environmental and trade union organizations. The least density of interaction was marked during this period in the sectors of CSOs working with gender equality and identity, city and regional development, and in the sector of religious organizations.

If to characterize the cooperation of civil society organizations in 2015 – the early 2020 as a whole, it is necessary to notice that in spite of the fact that the organizations closely cooperated among themselves, communicated and shared experiences, and rendered expert services to each other, they did not implement joint partner programs very often. Among the reasons, it is possible to name the complexities in the development of a joint strategy, the differences in the approaches and priorities of their activity. One of the tools of synchronization of the strategic vision for the organizations (in particular it concerns the organizations similar in the subjects of their activity) is various network structures, platforms, and coalitions. Among them, it is possible to mention such platforms for sectorial interaction as the Belarusian Human Rights Defending Forum, the

¹ See: Aksana Shelest, Andrei Yahorau, Olga Smolyanko. Civil society of Belarus: today's condition and development conditions, Minsk, 2018. The report on the research results (CET, 2018: https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/DOC/1/2018_Civil-Society-Belarus_RU.pdf

National Platform of Business of Belarus, the Belarusian National Youth Council “Rada”, the Association of Additional Education and Enlightenment, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, the Forum of Public Environmental Organizations of Belarus, etc. The basic focus of work of cross-sector platforms uniting the organizations of different topics (e.g. the Assembly of Non-Governmental Democratic Organizations of Belarus and the Belarusian National Platform of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership) is to represent Belarusian civil society’s common interests, including at the international scene.

Vigorous activity during this period was carried out by the umbrella organization called the Belarusian National Youth Council “Rada”² that implemented various actions and projects concerning youth subjects, provided its member organizations with additional resources, represented itself as a platform to discuss problems of the whole youth sector, coordinated various interests inside youth organizations, and worked out the general strategic vision³. In 2019, “Rada” managed to restore its official registration and tried to build some dialogue with the Belarusian authorities concerning the legislation regulating the state youth policy. In particular, the Council attempted to participate in the working-out of the strategy aimed at developing the youth policy for 2020–2030.

It is also necessary to mark the activity of the association of environmental organizations “Green Alliance”⁴ that unites a significant number of environmental organizations in Belarus. In 2015–2019, the Association carried out a number of significant projects and initiatives, among which: the annual school of eco-activism, the campaign to protect city green zones “City Woodward”, and many other things.

As mentioned above, human rights defending organizations closely cooperate with each other, including at the level of joint activities and discussions of the strategic agenda of the human rights defending sector as a whole. This interaction is frequently of no formal character; it is not presented as a separate platform or a network structure. The exception is the Belarusian House of Human Rights named after Boris Zvozkov that was founded by several Belarusian human rights defending organizations and, in this sense, acts as a constant platform for the organizations. Also, the Belarusian Human Rights Defending Forum was a periodic platform to discuss problems, to share experiences, and to develop a uniform

² Belarusian National Youth Council “Rada”, see: <https://rada.fm/>

³ In 2016, 2017, and 2019, there were conferences called «RADA FORUM», as attempts to organize a strategic event for the sector: <http://forum.rada.fm/>

⁴ «Green Alliance», see: <https://greenbelarus.info/>

strategy for the sector of human rights; it was carried out from time to time (during the studied period, it was carried out in 2017 only).

One of formats of cooperation between organizations is coalition interaction on a number of narrow concrete practices such as the preparation of alternative reports to the UN treaty bodies, reports on Belarus' observance of the UN Convention against tortures, on the prolongation of the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Belarus within the framework of the «Human Rights Dialogue EU-Belarus», etc., as well as the participation in the development of criteria of recognizing someone a political prisoner and the position coordination of the Belarusian human rights defending community in concrete cases of infringements of human rights. As for the carrying-out of joint campaigns, they were carried out basically in the form of signing petitions, joint statements, and sending proposals to legislative or executive bodies. Campaigns to defend political prisoners were the biggest ones. Also, a significant campaign launched by a number of large organizations in 2009 is the campaign "Human rights defenders against capital punishment in Belarus". During this campaign, except for legal aid rendered to those condemned to the death penalty, monitoring of infringements, registration of appeals to international bodies, etc., there were informational-educational actions/events such as annual weeks against capital punishment, etc.

We shall describe several different cases of public campaigns in 2015 – the beginning of 2020, which became the result of joint activity of several organizations of the third sector or which a lot of various subjects (activists, representatives of local communities, businesses, political structures, etc.) participated in, but public organizations played the leading part in it. It is necessary to underline, however, that in the most mass public campaigns and initiatives during this period the organization of the third sector were not the basic motive power, but rather acted *pari passu* with other subjects⁵.

⁵ Among such campaigns: the campaign to save the Katoŭka public garden in Minsk, during which the inhabitants together with eco-activists managed to prevent the construction of a Roman Catholic church in this public garden; the mass protests against Decree №3 «About the prevention of social dependence», i.e. a special tax on non-employed citizens; the campaign to prevent the construction of a business center near the historical park Kurapaty in Minsk, where victims of Stalin repressions were killed; the celebrating of the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic (1918) in the center of Minsk; the campaign against the construction of a battery factory in Brest; the social movement "Mothers 328" that actively struggled against the excessively rigid antinarcotic legislation and unfair sentences; the campaign "Fresh Wind", which purpose was "not to allow the signing of the integration agreement with the Russian Federation that menaced Belarus' sovereignty".

The campaign “To protect the Belarusian bogs”

The campaign “To protect the Belarusian bogs”⁶ carried out by a coalition of environmental organizations became a successful case of intra-sectorial interaction. The campaign lasted for several years and became the most successful advocacy practice in the environmental themes.

In 2011, the government of Belarus accepted Decision №794 «About some questions of extraction of peat and optimization of the system of especially protected natural territories». This Decision made it possible to extract peat from marshes on the territory of eight zakazniki [a kind of a nature reserve]. Thus, 8 morasses were doomed to be drained. These plans were noticed by the public: in June 2011, in the Biarezina Biospheric Nature Reserve, the Forum of independent environmental organizations took place, and it accepted a resolution condemning the plans of draining moors, and the campaign “To protect the Belarusian bogs” was launched on October, 25th, 2012. Its purpose was to cancel this Decision and to preserve the eight bogs, as well as to advance the topic of the preservation of marsh systems among the population. The campaign organizing committee included the largest environmental organizations in Belarus – the public association «Belarusian Birds Protection», the public association “EcoHome”, the establishment «Center of Environmental Decisions», the association «Green Alliance», as well as the initiative group “Without bogs? No!” that later became the public association “Bagna”.

The campaign began its activity with the petition demanding to preserve the natural eco-systems⁷. Also, at the initial stage, its organizers were engaged in the awareness-raising work with the population (field expeditions, work with local residents, support to local initiatives that are engaged in “marsh” subjects, etc.). Later, the work with local communities and initiatives was supplemented by several directions: legal, scientific, cultural-educational.

The legal direction included the preparation of motions, appeals, and proposals to various state structures and departments, pinpoint work with officials, and the organization of legal consultations for local residents who wanted to protect their environmental rights.

The scientific work concentrated on the substantiation of the inexpediency of the accepted decisions from the point of view of ecology and economy, on the search for alternative solutions and projects. This work was conducted in close coope-

⁶ See more: <https://www.bahna.ngo/ru/art/vosem-bolot/>

⁷ During the campaign, the petition was signed by more than 26,000 people and 90 non-commercial organizations.

ration with scientists from the Institute of Wildlife Management, the Scientific-Practical Center of Bio-Resources, the Institute of Experimental Botany of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, experts from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Preservation of Environment. There was an independent environmental examination of the project, a comparative analysis of the economic feasibility of drainage of the especially protected natural territories, an evaluation of the environmental importance of 8 bogs and their eco-system services, an evaluation of the influence of peat mining on each of these marshes; a plan of the sustainable use of these places was developed. Also, a series of scientific conferences, seminars, meetings, and round tables was carried out.

Also, there was an awareness-raising informational cultural-educational campaign that drew attention of the international community: performances, exhibitions, lectures, master classes, videoclips and a film, the web-site of the campaign and many other things, which made it possible to draw attention of the wide public to this issue.

For more effective signatures collection, in each of the regions, working groups of experts, activists, and local residents were created.

As a result, Decision №794 was cancelled. Also, the public participation promoted the acceptance by the government in 2016 of the Strategy of the preservation and rational (sustainable) use of peat-bogs⁸ and the Law “To protect and use of peat-bogs”⁹ in 2019.

The campaign to protect the micro-district Osmolovka in Minsk

The following case that reveals in a different way the role of the organizations of the third sector in the solution of public problems is the campaign against the demolition of the Minsk historical micro-district Osmolovka. The micro-district Osmolovka was built in 1945–1949 by the architect Mikhail Osmolovsky. Located in the very center of Minsk, two residential quarters with two-storied buildings are of not only historical, but also purely pragmatic value for the inhabitants; however, the city authorities announced repeatedly their plans to pull down this micro-district. Since 2007, the inhabitants tried many times to protect this area

⁸ See: Decision of the Council of Ministers of Belarus d/d December, 30th, 2015 №1111 «About some questions in the field of the preservation and rational (sustainable) use of peat-bogs»// Pravo.by. – 27.01.2022: https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C21501111_1452114000.pdf

⁹ See: Law of the Republic of Belarus d/d 18 December 2019 №272–Z «About the protection and use of peat-bogs»// Pravo.by. – 27.01.2022: https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/H11900272_1577394000.pdf

from the demolition, trying to make the Ministry of Culture to give this micro-district the status of historical and cultural value. These attempts were futile.

In 2016, the local residents decided to address the Ministry of Culture with this question once again. For this purpose, with the assistance of the public association «Historica», the necessary documents were collected and an appeal was written, and this time they were not rejected, but accepted for consideration. The initiative was supported by various public organizations, including environmental ones. The active phase of the campaign began, and the problem reached the city level, drawing attention of bloggers and the mass media. Closer cooperation was started with the organizations of the third sector such as the Minsk Urbanistic Platform, the project “City”, “Budźma”, the Office of European Expertise and Communication, «Historica», and “City Woodward”. Environmental organizations and activists who helped the local residents to advance the environmental line to protect this area from the pulling-down examined the value of flora in this micro-district and promoted this agenda in the Ministry of Protection of Environment and Natural Resources.

A special place in the coordination of efforts of various actors (businesses, mass media, activists, CSOs) was occupied by the public initiative “City General Plan – For Minskners!”. Also, the local residents began to carry out regular actions in their court yards: festivals, subbotniks, etc.; the micro-district opened its web-site and pages in social networks. The peak of activity of the campaign was in 2017 when the city authorities presented a project of city detailed planning, which doomed this area to be pulled down, for a public discussion. From the point of view of the legislation, such public discussions were an obligatory practice during the acceptance of such town-planning decisions; however, to really influence the presented decisions is impossible, which turns such discussions into formality. Still, the coordinated actions of the local residents, activists, and CSOs allowed them to turn the formality into the real tool of solving the problem. Thanks to the public resonance, attention of the mass media, bloggers, as well as mass appeals and the petition¹⁰, which Internet version was supported by more than 7,000 persons (at that moment, it was one of the most mass petitions on the platform), the decision on this area was postponed and the project was officially sent to be re-worked.

Like in the first example, the story had a positive continuation: in 2018 the Osmolovska quarters were included in the protection zone, which does not mean that these buildings are in the list of historical and cultural heritage, but it means

¹⁰ See: Convenient City. Petition #744. We are against the demolition of Osmolovka // Petitions.by. – 27.01.2022: <https://petitions.by/petitions/744>

that they cannot be pulled down and the architectural shape of these buildings cannot be changed.

«The Year Of Belarusian Thinking»

One more significant sphere of civil society organizations is various cultural and educational actions. One of events of the period of 2015–2020 was The Year Of Belarusian Thinking¹¹ proclaimed by a number of public initiatives and organizations: the International Consortium EuroBelarus, Flying University, Belarusian Collegium, the Belarusian Union of Designers, the public campaign “Budźma [Let’s Be] Belarusians!”, the establishment “Language Anew” [Mova Nanova], the Internet edition “Belarusian Magazine”. This campaign became a unique event for Belarus, a sui generis manifestation of the intellectual development “here and now”.

The campaign was aimed at drawing attention to Belarusian scientific and philosophical achievements, to the uniqueness of the Belarusian intellectual way and tradition. The organizers had several tasks: to make visible the intellectual history of Belarus, to designate today’s challenges, and to expand the space of thinking from local institutions to the general intellectual field.

The campaign began in the end of May 2015 with the project “Cytuj svajo”¹²: everybody who is interested in it was asked to send the organizers his/her favorite quotations from Belarusian authors. Then, the collected quotes were turned into design prints for clothes and souvenirs with the words of Belarusian classics. The project was completed with the edition of a pocket quotation collection.

Also, during the Year Of Belarusian Thinking, the anthology of Belarusian thinking “The Code of The Presence”¹³ was published; it was the second in the history of the independent country such an anthology with authors’ texts written in 2000–2015. During the whole year, there were lectures, discussions, and conferences aimed at various topics of the past, the present, and the future of the country;

¹¹ See: The show must go on, or The year is over, but thinking is still here (photos) // EuroBelarus. Info. – 27.01.2022: <https://eurobelarus.info/special-project/god-belaruskaga-myslennya/2016/09/19/the-show-must-go-on-al-bo-god-zavyarshaetsya-myslenne.html>

¹² See: The project “Cytuj svajo!” starts the Year Of Belarusian Thinking // EuroBelarus.Info. – 27.01.2022: <https://eurobelarus.info/news/programs/2015/07/19/paekt-tsyuy-svae-raspachyna-god-belaruskaga-myslennya.html>

¹³ See: Why Apollo is a Belarusian god, and other interesting things of national thinking (photos) // EuroBelarus.Info. – 27.01.2022: <https://eurobelarus.info/special-project/god-belaruskaga-myslennya/2016/05/20/chamu-apalon-belarusk-bog-nshyya-ts-kav-nk.html>

actions/events were organized in different cities of Belarus. Prominent Belarusian intellectuals, experts, scientists, art and cultural figures took part in them. The campaign was finished by the festival of national thought “The Week Of Belarusian Thinking”¹⁴ carried out at the end of September 2016, which included more than 50 actions/events of various formats: exhibitions of intellectual editions, lectures, discussions, presentations, master classes, performances, etc., which were carried out all across the country.

¹⁴ See: The Week Of Belarusian Thinking is ended by a Lavon Volski concert (photos) // Euro Belarus.Info. – 27.01.2022: <https://eurobelarus.info/special-project/god-belaruskaga-myslennya/2016/09/26/tydzen-belaruskaga-myslennya-zavyarshy-sya-kantsertam-lyavona.html>

National-cultural associations in the Republic of Belarus: legislation and the basic focus of activity

prepared by Center of Equal Rights Expertise

The Republic of Belarus is a multinational state; according to the population census in 2019, representatives of about 140 nationalities (ethnic groups) live in the country. The share of representatives of the ethnic groups, which do not belong to the titular nation, is about 15% of all the population of the Republic. The most numerous national minorities are Russian (7,5% of the whole population), Poles (3,1%), and Ukrainians (1,7%). The number of other ethnic groups does not exceed 0,1%; although the regional measurement is of great importance for the Republic of Belarus, e.g. in the Hrodna Voblaść [Region] the aggregate number of representatives of national minorities is about 30% of the whole population of this Voblaść [Region]¹.

Representatives of 25 ethnic communities created 205 national-cultural public associations (NCPAs); 25% of them are registered in Minsk. As of January, 1st, 2021, the number of Polish national-cultural associations were in the lead (78 organizations; 36 of which are registered in the Hrodna Voblaść [Region]); Jewish national-cultural organizations – 43; 11 of which are registered in Minsk; Russian organizations – 17; Ukrainian organizations – 13; Azerbaijani – 10; Lithuanian – 9; 6 of which are registered in the Hrodna Voblaść [Region]².

As a whole, it is possible to notice the following tendencies in the development of national-cultural public associations:

¹ Total number of population, number of population as for age and sex, marriage, educational level, nationalities, language, sources of income, all across the Republic of Belarus. Statistical bulletin. – Minsk, National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2020. – p.35

² List of national-cultural public associations registered in the Republic of Belarus (as of January, 1st, 2021). https://belarus21.by/Articles/nac_cult_ob

First, in 2015 – mid-2020, there was a stable tendency aimed at the organizational development of national-cultural organizations of minorities in the Republic as a whole; strengthening of their contacts with diplomatic representatives of the mother countries; active work with youth; advancement of the languages of the minorities;

Second, the infrastructure of interactions of the authorities with NCPAs (inter-ethnic councils); support to national cultures by the state-run programs could become a good basis for partnership – however, the authorities' repressive actions after August, 2020, actually crossed out the long-term efforts aimed at constructing partner relations;

Third, the development of NCPAs was actually isolated from other NGOs' development, which had to do with the peculiarities of the legislation, the presence of a separate state body (the Representative on religions and nationalities), and the use of budgetary funds to support NCPAs' activity;

Fourth, NCPAs were conductors of national diplomacy in the international relations of the Republic of Belarus with the mother countries of certain diasporas and of business initiatives aimed at investing in Belarus' economy. The position of NCPAs of certain minorities reflects Belarus' relations with other mother countries of minorities.

International legal obligations

The Republic of Belarus participates in the basic international conventions accepted in the system of the United Nations that have to do with the protection of minorities, encouragement of cultural diversity and counteraction of racial and ethnic discrimination: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, etc.

Belarus became part of the CSCE/OSCE system, while still being part of the USSR; therefore, it abides by the CSCE's basic documents accepted before Belarus received its independence – first of all: the 1990 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE and the 1991 Charter of Paris for a new Europe. Also, it abides by later recommendatory documents, including the Hague, Oslo, and Lund recommendations of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

The Republic of Belarus is a participant of a number of treaties accepted within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that concern the protection of minorities and nondiscrimination, as well as migration regulation. Among them, it is necessary to name the Charter of the CIS, 1991 (Article 3 includes a provision aimed at securing human rights and basic freedoms for everybody regardless of one's race, ethnic belonging, language, religion, political or other beliefs); the Convention of the CIS on human rights and basic freedoms, 1995 (Article 20 – about equality and nondiscrimination; Article 21 – about the rights of minorities); the Agreement on questions that have to do with the restoration of rights of deported persons, national minorities and peoples, 1992; the Agreement on cooperation in the sphere of education, 1992. The Convention aimed at securing the rights of national minorities d/d October, 21st, 1994, is of especial value.

Almost all framework bilateral treaties on friendship and cooperation Belarus concluded with other states (Russian Federation, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova, etc.) contain mutual obligations concerning the protection of minorities.

The legislation of the Republic of Belarus, government programs, state bodies

The basic legal mechanisms are envisaged in the following documents:

- The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, 1994 (with changes and additions accepted on the national referenda on November, 24th, 1996 and October, 17th, 2004) contains articles directly concerning interactions of ethnic communities and the authorities (Articles 14, 15, 22, 50).
- The law about national minorities, 1992 (in 2004 and 2007 there were changes and additions in it, which did not essentially change its content).
- According to Article 90, part 6 of the Code of the Republic of Belarus about education (2011, 2021), “according to wishes of pupils and their lawful representatives, according to a decision of local executive and administrative organs, coordinated with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, groups can be created in preschool education establishments, classes, groups in establishments of general secondary education or establishments of preschool, general secondary education, in which training and education are carried out in the language of a national minority or a national minority's language is studied”.

It is necessary to notice that in Belarus there is a practice of implementing government programs that consider the interests of national minorities: since 2006, for a five-year period, programs aimed at developing the faith-based sphere, national relations and cooperation with compatriots abroad have been accepted. Right now there is the subprogram “Cultural Heritage” of the government program «Culture of Belarus» for 2021–2025.

A specialized state structure that implements the state policy in the ethnic and faith-based sphere, as well as in the sphere of mutual relations of the state and public associations of citizens who consider themselves national minorities, is the Representative on religions and nationalities. An important role in the work with national-cultural associations is played by the state official body «National Center of National Cultures».

Interethnic councils as a form of partnership of the state with national-cultural associations

Advisory interethnic councils of national communities at the state official body «National Center of National Cultures», at the office of the Representative on religions and nationalities, at the majority of Departments on Religions and Nationalities at regional executive committees and at the Minsk City Executive Committee worked actively enough in 2010 – mid-2020. These councils were constantly working consultative public formations with no legal status and worked on a pro-bono basis.

The main objectives and tasks of these councils are present in the special document³. Examples of questions discussed at sessions of the councils at the national level are: about the distribution of financing to implement projects of NCPAs (quarterly); about the participation in charity actions/events; about the preparation and carrying-out of actions/events of the National Festival of National Cultures; about the participation in the exhibition «The Mass Media In Belarus», where NCPAs’ media projects and mass media are usually presented; about the carrying-out of cycles of press conferences and the implementation of other mass media projects with the participation of NCPAs (annual, periodical), the re-printing of the album «Belarus Polyethnic». The activity of regional (local) councils is of much less active character.

³ About the activity of the Advisory Interethnic Council./Representative on religions and nationalities: https://belarus21.by/Articles/nac_deyat_sovet

It is necessary to mark that the presence of the specialized state program and the interethnic advisory councils helped to develop the administrative competences of NCPA leaders, to activate NCPAs' cultural programs. Possibilities to use the administrative resource and the budget for some cultural activities of NCPAs⁴, on the one hand, stimulated NCPAs' organizational development and activity revival, but, on the other hand, led to the development of self-censorship in the environment of NCPAs and the demonstration of NCPAs' loyalty to the authorities.

The basic topics which NCPAs work with⁵

An important feature of NCPAs' activity is their orientation exclusively on projects in the cultural sphere (exhibitions, dancing collectives, etc.). Attempts of some organizations to touch the questions of: hate language in the mass media, ethnic profiling by employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, insufficient availability of educational services for children of Romani origin, discrimination of Romani women while they look for a job (the public organization «Belarusian Romani Diaspora»), organization of classes with education in the Ukrainian language (organizations of the Ukrainian minority), remain not heard by the authorities – the mentioned problems are being denied.

During the last decade, the biggest value in the development of ethnic identity belongs to the studying of the language of the national minority. And the basic form was language open classrooms; public and Sunday schools (Armenian, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Estonian, etc.). Throughout a number of years, in Minsk, there are Sunday schools created by city public associations registered by the central administrative board of justice of the Minsk City Executive Committee: Armenian Sunday school – at the Minsk city cultural-educational society “Haya-stan”; Jewish – at the «Jewish cultural society “Emuna”; courses of the Ukrainian language organized by the scientific and pedagogical society “Berehynia” in Minsk, Brest, and Homiel; courses on Yiddish at the Minsk public association of Jewish culture named after Izi Kharik. On the basis of the National Center of National Cultures, there are classes of Sunday groups for national communities where the Georgian, Tatar, Bashkir, Lithuanian, German, Estonian, and Korean languages are studied. National languages are used during the carrying-out of cultural events (national holidays, concerts, literary-poetic evenings, etc.).

⁴ E.g. NCPAs' printed editions were financed at the expense of the means allocated for these purposes to the Representative on religions and nationalities from the national budget.

⁵ In this section, organizations of the Polish minority are mentioned a little bit as a separate article is dedicated to them.

Newspapers and magazines of national communities in the languages of national minorities were published in Belarus in insignificant numbers, which was caused by difficulties of financing of their regular printing.

The biggest practical use of national languages is in the cultural sphere – literary competitions, execution of songs in national languages, national festivals of national cultures.

In 2015–2017, with the support of the Council of Europe, the project «Advancement of the standards of the European Charter of regional languages and languages of minorities in Belarus» was carried out; its participants were NCPA leaders. Its main objective was to raise national minorities' awareness of the European Charter of regional languages and languages of minorities and to help the Belarusian authorities during the consideration of legal scenarios of a possible joining of the country to this Charter. The results of the project are reflected in the book «The Republic of Belarus and the European Charter of regional languages and languages of minorities»⁶. Conclusions of the working group concerning the conditions for development of languages of minorities in Belarus and prospects of joining to the Charter were quite optimistic; however, this initiative did not receive any further continuation. Still, the participation in the project, the book edition in languages of minorities, resulted in the activization of NCPAs' initiatives in the sphere of advancing languages of minorities in various forms (thematic stands in libraries, mass media, working-out of methodical books for language educations, etc.). The subsequent initiatives of the Council of Europe aimed at creating and installing information stands near objects of the cultural-historical heritage of Belarus, connected with the history of minorities and in languages of minorities, had no further development.

However, the idea of a wider representation of the history and culture, as well as language of minorities, became popular. In 2019, on the territory of the Lutheran public garden in the Moscow District of the city of Minsk (Karl Liebknecht Street), there was an opening ceremony of a commemorative token to the so-called "German Sloboda ["suburb, settlement"]» that existed here in the borders of 3 streets: Lutheran, Small Lutheran, and German, which were renamed into the street of Volokh, Clara Zetkin, and Rosa Luxemburg. The public association of German culture "Bridges" and the Lutheran community "Salvation" (head – Shtokman O. I.) were the organizers of this event.

⁶ The Republic of Belarus and the European Charter of regional languages and languages of minorities. Minsk, 2019. <https://rm.coe.int/the-ecrml-in-the-republic-of-belarus-eng-ru-bel/168097ed09>

In 2020–2021, the public association «Belarusian Romani Diaspora» carried out a series of actions/events of the German-Belarusian project «Remembering the Romani genocide on the territory of Belarus during the Great Patriotic War», including the presentation of the archive of oral history «The forgotten Romani genocide in Belarus in 1941–1944» and exhibitions «Who are you, the Romani people?»; the actions/events were implemented in the partnership with the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Germany, the German educational center «For Peace», the National Center of National Cultures (Belarus), and the historical workshop named after L. Levin.

At the same time, it is necessary to underline that in 2020–2021 some NCPAs became victims of the authorities' repressions: the Lithuanians' society "Vitis" (Minsk) and the public association of German culture "Bridges" (Minsk) were liquidated; but it was the Polish minority's organizations that suffered most of all – about 10 organizations have been liquidated or are being liquidated now; schools where the Polish language is studied, created by NCPAs, are being checked. A rather strange situation is with the Festival of National Cultures that was to take place in Hrodna in 2020 and that was cancelled ostensibly because of the COVID-19 pandemic⁷. The results of selection rounds were cancelled and in 2021 selection rounds began anew; a number of Polish creative collectives (ensembles) were not allowed to take part in these new selection rounds of the Festival. In October 2021, the authorities declared that the concept of the Festival changed⁸, however, there is still no information on what was changed in detail and who was the initiator of these changes.

⁷ The international festival of arts "Slavic Bazaar in Viciebsk» took place in 2020, and the pandemic did not hinder its carrying-out.

⁸ What changes will appear in the organization of the Festival of National Cultures https://hrodnanews.by/news/kultura/kakie_izmeneniya_poyavyatsya_v_organizatsii_festivalya_natsionalnykh_kultur.html

The Polish minority's organizations in Belarus

prepared by Center of Equal Rights Expertise

After the disintegration of the USSR, in the early 1990s, in Belarus, activists of the Polish minority created an organizational structure that united two Polish cultural-educational societies in Minsk and Hrodna and created the Union of Poles in Belarus (UPB). The organization initiated the creation of centers to study Polish culture and the Polish language (Polish Houses, frequently created with the financial support of Poland); cultural and religious relations with Poland were maintained; the newspaper and the magazine of the organization were published; it was planned to create the Polish Democratic Party. In 2005, during the attempt of the Belarusian authorities to impose their own leader to the organization and to make the UPB controlled by the state, the organization split in two parts. The authorities declared that the UPB that elected Andżelika Borys its head is illegal and created their own UPB. Since then, in Belarus, there are two Unions of Poles – one is recognized by Minsk and occupies a passive political position; the other one is recognized by Warsaw and acts much more actively.

Since 2005, the unofficial UPB has been oppressed by the authorities. There have been a lot of judicial proceedings against informal Polish organizations in Belarus and their heads; their mass actions/events have been forbidden; other obstacles for the implementation of their national-cultural rights under the aegis of the «illegitimate» Union have been created.

According to the information voiced by the leaders of both Unions during their congresses in 2021, both structures declare their orientation on the preservation and popularization of Polish national culture, authenticity, preservation of traditions, studying of the national language by means of organizing and carrying out cultural actions/events, educating young people, and strengthening relations with the historical native land.

The official UPB unites about 65 regional, city, district, and rural departments, which include about 4,500 people. It owns 14 Polish Houses with the headquarters in Minsk, Salomiennaja Street¹. In 2021, the previous chairman of the official UPB Mieczysław Lysy was substituted for a newly elected chairman – the deputy of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Songin. The number of members of the organization is three times less than that of the non-recognized UPB (4,500 against 12,000 people).

The chairwoman of the informal UPB Andżelika Borys informed that right now the UPB includes 116 structures (12 branches more than two years ago). In total, the organization unites more than 12,000 participants, and on the basis of local branches there are more than 100 centers to study the Polish language. She said that on places there are schools and social educational centers, art collectives; activists look after Polish burial places and memory places².

Leaders of the informal UPB accuse Minsk of violent assimilation, repressions. Despite a lot of restrictions connected with far-fetched interdictions of actions and the pandemic, last year the UPB managed to organize more than 100 actions/events. According to A. Borys, the UPB is a strong organization thanks to their unity and consent inside the organization, when its activity is visible, when people initiate new projects and are not afraid of doing it.

It is necessary to notice that in some cases the same people can be part of both UPBs and/or participate in actions/events of both unions. A number of actions/events have a duplicating character, when the Unions carry out under the same name the same actions/events – for example, the festival of crafts “Kaziuki”. In such cases, the authorities usually use the administrative resource, and the UPB of A. Borys – support of the Polish party.

The official UPB demonstrates its political apathy; the other Union is aimed at defending its interests up to the active criticism of the authorities. At the height of the protests in August 2020, activists of the non-recognized UPB headed by A. Borys carried out near the Consulate General of Poland in Hrodna an action of solidarity with the protesters. During the action, Borys said that members of her organization actively participated in the street protests and declared that the organization would render them financial and legal aid in case of problems with

¹ Vladislav Gulevich. Who indoctrinates the idea that Belarus is a Polish land? Poland against Poles: <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2021/08/31/kto-vnushaet-chto-belorussija-polskaja-zemla-54363.html>

² O działalności oddziałów ZPB na wschodzie Białorusi: <http://zadaniemna.pl/51529/o-dzialalnosc-i-oddzialow-zpb-na-wschodzie-bialorusi/?fbclid=IwAR0bioMIvFR0GcW77nLOWNvYKG0xTFT9hG14qKEs6VnDKvNLRmJm-vGCeNA>

the police³. Separate representatives of the organization took part in protest actions of the opposition during the previous years, too. The Polish party limited entrance for activists of the official UPB and the persons who infringed the interests of the UPB headed by A. Borys. There were a lot of such actions during the periods of “aggravations” and “warming” of relations; they became part of their policies.

On the eve of the 2020 election, Lukashenko said that his opponents were guided by “puppeteers” from Poland and from Russia; Poland pays money to protesters, wants to occupy the Hrodna Voblaść [Region], and destructively-oriented Poles (it is necessary to read – members of the informal UPB) are «agents of these plans».

In 2020–2021, the leaders of the informal UPB (A. Borys, A. Poczobut, and others), journalists (the editor-in-chief of «the Polish Magazine in exile» I. Bantser, television cameraman TVP Polonia A. Frolov, the editor-in-chief of the news Internet portal of the Polish minority in Belarus <https://znadniemna.pl> A. Pisalnik, and others) were repressed; liquidated are: organizations – the Polish social scout school named after Romuald Traugutt in Brest, the public association «Society of medical Polonia» (Minsk); the Minsk city cultural-educational public association of Poles «Poloniczka» (Minsk); the cultural-educational establishment “Kresy” (Baranavičy); the youth-sports establishment «Polish Scouting and Guiding Organization “Hort”(Barysau); the cultural establishment “Chorus Cantus Cordis” (Minsk), etc.

Polish organizations are accused of incitement of ethnic hatred; Nazism rehabilitation; conducting of activity that contradicts the Charter; economic infringements; distribution of the information that discredits Belarus.

It is necessary to underline that the Belarusian authorities, as a rule, do not inform organizations about their liquidation; organizations can learn about the accepted decision if they check the organization status in the Uniform state register of legal bodies or from the mass media.

In case with the liquidation of «Poloniczka», one day before the trial the head of the organization received an SMS demanding “to come to the hearing on July, 30th, 2021, to the Minsk City Court”. The court judgment was accepted on the basis of the claim of the Central administrative board of registration and licensing of the Central administrative board of the Minsk City Executive Committee, in which it was said that «according to the information provided by the Department

³ Kirill Ozimko. Split and politics: what is going on with the Polish Diaspora in Belarus: <https://ukraina.ru/exclusive/20210618/1031650397.html>

of struggle against economic crimes at the Criminal Police of the Minsk City Executive Committee, it was established (during a check) that «Poloniczka» carried out an activity that does not correspond to the purposes and subject specified in the Charter, and officials of the association spread obviously false information discrediting the Republic of Belarus. «Poloniczka» is subject to liquidation when due hereunder». No data and no facts confirming the “guilt” of the organization were presented in court. However, the decision was accepted by the court. A copy of the judgment was never sent to the head of the organization.

Following these events, Minsk declared a re-registration of all educational institutions where the Polish language is studied. Checks of all centers where the Polish language is studied were initiated by the Office of Public Prosecutor and by other supervising organs; these checks have been going on in many cities all across Belarus: in Hrodna, Brest, Lida, Vaŭkavysk, Baranavičy, and other cities. During the checks, personal data of teachers and pupils are collected.

In particular: on the eve of a new academic year employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Hrodna entered the office of the Union of Poles in Belarus, in which there was an organizational meeting of teachers working in the Polish language centers of the UPB. A UPB activist said on Facebook that the employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs ostensibly received an anonymous message that at the UPB office there was an «illegal meeting». The policemen wrote down the data of all the persons who were in the premises of the UPB and left⁴.

The Polish activist and journalist Andrzej Pisalnik says he has a document given to him by the head of a Polish language school in Smarhoń, in which the Office of Public Prosecutor requested the data of teachers, a list of pupils (including children), studying the Polish language, and financial documents and educational programs: «The authorities are collecting the information on the people studying the Polish language in Belarus. To carry out “morale building activities” with them can be the purpose. Perhaps, they want to make these Poles loyal in relation to power. However, it looks like a wide campaign of intimidation of the Polish minority in Belarus. Especially it concerns the Poles who want to keep and popularize their traditions, language, and culture», – he said⁵.

⁴ PILNE: Milicja weszła do biura Związku Polaków na Białorusi!: https://znadniemna.pl/54360/pilne-milicja-weszla-do-biura-zwiazku-polakow-na-bialorusi/?fbclid=IwAR1plivwPbuebqZf9_Ec8ixoiskh-4M8dL9MsUnIRisJ14yLcVsNwY0u6bc

⁵ Andrzej Pisalnik: działacze ZPB usłyszą zarzuty przed Wielkanocą, trwają kontrole w szkołach uczących polskiego: <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/1223/Artykul/2707491,Andrzej-Pisalnik-dzialacze-ZPB-uslysza-zarzuty-przed-Wielkanoca-trwaja-kontrole-w-szkolach-uczacych-polskiego>

The Polish language is taught basically on out-of-school courses organized by independent Polish organizations. According to the UPB Main Board, in Belarus, right now there are about 120 educational institutions, in which, in various legal and organizational forms, the Polish language is taught. Most of all children and adults study in Hrodna (1,400 persons), Baranavičy (750), Brest (900), Minsk (500), Lida (300), Vaŭkavysk (200), Barysaŭ (200), and Mazyr (200). In total, right now, the Polish language is studied by about 8,000 pupils.

On April, 10th, 2021, the head of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei announced a check of activity of organizations that organized paid language courses, which would put things in order in this question. Commercial schools where the Polish language was studied were checked by the Office of Public Prosecutor and other supervising organs. Pupils' exercise books were checked, too; pupils themselves were interrogated.

The Belarusian authorities check public schools with language courses, trying to find "illegal entrepreneurial activity". Thus, for example, the Eliza Orzeszkowa Lycée in Hrodna became an object of interest of the Office of Public Prosecutor in March 2021. This is the largest in Belarus public school of the Polish language with more than 20 teachers, 73 groups, and 1,117 pupils. In April 2021, the Lycée, which officially carries out its activity at «Polish Macierz School», was asked to register its activity as a legal entity. The establishment satisfied this condition and in June received the corresponding document from the authorities of Hrodna. At the will of the authorities, the establishment was renamed into the Center of the Polish language and culture; it coordinated its curriculum with the Ministry of Education. However, at the same time, the Department of Financial Control paid attention to this Center. The Lycée worked since 2011 and until now there were no objections concerning voluntary payments from parents, but the authorities accused the Lycée of illegal economic activities. On October, 27th, 2021, in Hrodna, there was a hearing on the case against the Lycée. The court recognized that the law was broken and imposed an obligation to pay 25% of a tax for the last three years. The service of financial control counted that the establishment should pay 298,000 Belarusian roubles and 2,900 roubles of administrative penalty for conducting "illegal" business⁶.

⁶ Haracz na Polską Macierz Szkolną w Grodnie. W Grodnie 27 października: https://kresy24.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Glos-n183.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1rpnAikoFF-YKqJI6m8rOztqXmWQvBdGl0ghtVMKzJB4W2bBCrwQUIZ4&__cf_chl__tk=FH1b8tzveSIjs2S8C7TQRZzpUe9IrWwSKe9K0N8YRr0-1638383382-0-gaNycGzNCD0

Recently, smaller language schools in Baranavičy and Pinsk have been exposed to similar sanctions, too, which means that there is a consecutive repressive policy against such a type of educational institutions.

The semantic purpose of these checks was expressed by the Minister of Education Igor Karpenko, who on August, 24th, 2021 at the National pedagogical meeting, echoing Alexander Lukashenko, declared, «Private kindergartens and schools that work under the aegis of individual businessmen, public associations, or societies have been used by them basically for political ends; they have become hotbeds of color revolutions. And their employees and heads are part of destructive organizations at various levels». He underlined that education of children should be under strict control of the state because private education is a threat to society and becomes a destructive channel of advancing the external negative influence on the educational system, children and parents⁷.

Leaders of the informal UPB sent a number of appeals to the Polish government and the international structures of the United Nations, OSCE, the Council of Europe with requests to pay attention to the problem of protection of the rights of the Polish minority in Belarus.

⁷ Łukaszenka likwiduje polskie szkoły społeczne na Białorusi. "To rozsądniki kolorowych rewolucji": https://znadniemna.pl/54314/lukaszenka-likwiduje-polskie-szkoly-spoeczne-na-bialorusi-to-rozsadniki-kolorowych-rewolucji/?fbclid=IwAR1plivwPbuebqZf9_Ec8ixoiskh-4M8dL9MsUnIRisJ14yLcVsNwY0u6bc

Chapter B

Regional NGOs in the years 2015-2021: the actors, processes, specificity

Public organizations of the Brest Region in 2015–2020 – projects, campaigns, and the calendar of events

The author is a NGO activist

The period of 2015–2020 in the work of public organizations of the Brest Voblaść [Region] and the city of Brest can be described as a period of stable development. New initiatives used to appear and to become visible; intrasectoral and cross-sector cooperation kept developing. In the mass media space of the Region, the number of mentions of NGOs activity increased; there appeared new forms of presenting such information – storytelling, cards, and tests. In the Brest Region, various NGOs organized a number of events/actions in partnership or with assistance of the local authorities. Interactions between NGOs and the business community strengthened; business began to support public initiatives more actively. Below is a bit more detailed information on the work of NGOs in Brest and the Region.

In 2015, in Brest, the Brest Region youth public association “Time of the Earth” was registered. It actively worked until the autumn of 2020, when the organization leaders made a decision to relocate in connection with the political pressure. The organization worked in the environmental sphere and organized festivals, educational programs, exhibitions, etc.

Same year, in Brest, large-scale projects were implemented: the campaign «Without Visas» carried out the Festival of travel and self-education “Samachod”; “Media School” started its work, within the framework of which journalists from Brest-based editions and bloggers got acquainted with the work of public organizations and, at the end of the project, created their original materials on these public organizations. In 2015, in Brest, there was the first Volunteering Fair where public organizations and volunteer initiatives from Brest presented their work,

spoke about lines of their activity, carried out their master classes and thus involved new volunteers in their activity.

In 2017, in Brest, the organization Dziedzić launched the program “Be A Volunteer”, an educational program for Brest residents who would like to join the work of public organizations of the city. Within the pale of the project, there was the contest “Bourse of Ideas”, participants of which implemented their own socially useful ideas. Also, the mobile application “Be A Volunteer” was created – it collected the information on all public organizations and initiatives in Brest and became another possibility for NGOs in the Brest Region to advance their activities and to attract volunteers. Same year, in Brest, the NGO «For Bicycle Brest» carried out the first bicycle festival “With No Motor” that gathered more than 1,000 participants. The organization «Time of the Earth» implemented the “Environmental Activist School”. Cultural initiatives of the Brest Region worked actively: among them – the NGO “Space KX” appeared most frequently in the mass media space; it organized exhibitions, master classes, free markets, meetings with artists, theatrical figures, and cultural managers.

In 2018, in Brest, one of the most visible public campaigns in Belarus during the recent years was launched – the public campaign against the construction of the battery factory, which, nevertheless, was built near this regional center. Within the bounds of the campaign, activists gathered every Sunday on the central square of Brest and expressed their opinion concerning the battery factory. The campaign “Stop the AKB (Battery Factory)” collected more than 30,000 signatures of Brest residents against the factory, carried out its public monitoring and examination of the ecological safety of the factory equipment, organized meetings with representatives of the factory and the local authorities. In January 2019, the Assembly of the Non-Governmental Democratic Organizations of Belarus awarded the activists of the campaign “Stop the AKB” the award called “Champions of Civil Society”. They won in the nomination «Regional Event». Same year, representatives of the initiative group against the AKB received one more award – “They Made It”. This award annually marks Belarusians who change the world around them.

In 2018, the Brest branch of the NGO “Human Constanta” organized the Friendship And Creativity Festival dedicated to the problems of refugees from the Caucasian republics of Russia. More than 1,000 Caucasian families tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to cross the Poland-Belarus border, but – because of wrongful actions of the Polish boundary authorities – were compelled to come back to Brest. More than 200 residents of Brest and migrants from the Chechen Republic participated in the Festival. Since September 2016, the NGO “Human

Constanta” launched its Mission to help transit refugees in Brest. Since 2016, in the city, there are citizens of Russia from the regions of the North Caucasus, including the Chechen Republic. In March 2017, there appeared an office aimed at consulting foreign citizens and persons without citizenship; volunteers regularly carried out a situation monitoring in Brest and the border-crossing point Brest-Terespol. A number of thematic reports on the situation on the border were published. In May-August 2018, activists and volunteers distributed their questionnaire among the people who seek shelter in Poland, polled them at the train station, and rendered information, humanitarian, and consultation help to them.

The festival dedicated to the Freedom Day (March, 25th) became an important event in 2018. The organizers of the holiday were both political parties and city public organizations. The festival on one of the city central squares gathered more than 3,000 Brest residents who could get acquainted with performances of musical collectives, products of Brest handicraftsmen, activity of 20 public organizations from Brest, and a thematic photo exhibition. It is remarkable that the city authorities not only allowed the festival to take place, but also provided the scene and sound equipment free-of-charge, provided law enforcement and medical aid.

In 2018, in Brest, there was the first Forum of NGOs of the Brest Region. The organizer of the Forum was the organization Dziedzič in partnership with the Assembly of NGOs of Belarus. Before the Forum, there was a poll among 45 NGOs from the Brest Region (18 – from Brest; 27 regional ones) that demonstrated positive changes in the work of public organizations in 2016–2018. Thus, for example, more than half of respondents noticed that relations with the local authorities (27 out of 45), the presence in the mass media (31 out of 45), society’s trust in NGOs (26 out of 45) changed for the better. According to the poll, public organizations often had contacts with representatives of the local authorities, business, a bit less – with other public organizations from their regions. Also, 43 out of 45 representatives of public organizations marked the importance of creating a joint communication platform to exchange information and news among NGOs in the Region. After the Forum, such a platform was created on the basis of a Google calendar: each public organization of the Region received access to the calendar and a possibility to publish announcements of public events/actions and implemented projects.

The Forum of NGOs of the Brest Region showed that such events are extremely important for the development and activity of public organizations in the Region.

The year 2019 can be called one of the most successful in the work of public organizations of Brest in the strengthening of their partnership with the local authorities. Thus, in the spring, the public campaign “Bus station in Belarusian” was implemented successfully – the authorities heard the wishes of Brest residents and the building of a new bus station received the Belarusian language, announcements began to be made in the Belarusian language. In the summer, in Brest, there was the first festival of history and culture “Ulmus” (more than 2,000 participants); it was organized by the organization Dziedzič with the support of the Brest City Executive Committee and in partnership with the Administration of the Lenin District of the city Brest. At the end of the year, there was the 4th traditional public award “Volunteer of the Year” and “Project of the Year”. Like in the previous years, the award marked the best initiatives and projects of public organizations of the city and the most active volunteer.

In the beginning of 2020, public organizations of Brest felt they needed psychological courses aimed at supporting activists and volunteers because of their professional burnout: activists organized a cycle of meetings with psychologists «For Us».

In May 2020, the organization Dziedzič gathered together public initiatives, representatives of business structures, local mass media, and the city authorities in order to carry out the contest of city ideas «Regeneration». The contest resulted in 10 initiatives of Brest residents, which received financial, mentor, and administrative support. Civil initiatives that helped doctors and medical institutions appeared in the spring of the same year in the conditions of the pandemic in Brest and the Region. They united the efforts of activists of public organizations, businesses, which wanted to assist doctors in their struggle against the pandemic. We shall underline that during the second wave of the pandemic, after the presidential election and the mass repressions that followed it, the number of volunteers' initiatives that helped to struggle against the pandemic reduced very much – activists in their public statements refused to initiate campaigns of help under the conditions when the state money was spent on the police and repressions.

August 2020 became a turning point in the development of civil society in the country as a whole and in the Brest Region in particular. In the conditions of repressions against peaceful protests, prosecutions because of “wrong” points of view and statements, many NGOs and volunteer initiatives stopped their activity or sharply decreased the level of their activities.

It is remarkable that the repressions concerned organizations of various fields of activity – from environmental to charitable ones. E.g. the environmental organization «Time of the Earth» and its leaders were forced to move to Poland. The cultural space «Kryly Chalopa» was compelled to suspend its activity in Brest because of checks launched by the Financial Investigations Department and the Ministry of Emergency Measures. The cultural space «Hruntoŭnia» stopped its activity because its leaders had to flee the country. The head and volunteers of the Brest branch of the human rights defending center «Viasna» [“Spring”] and those of other organization were forced to leave Belarus as well¹.

Others NGOs lowered their activity or tried to avoid political topics, but the political crisis touched their work, too – the repressions compelled lots of managers and employees to go abroad, which, of course, affected negatively the efficiency of their activity.

At the same time, the campaign of help in the struggle against COVID-19 and the political crisis in August 2020 became powerful catalysts of Brest residents’ civil activity. In society, there appeared a need in independent information, political expertise. The interest in the history and culture of Belarus grew; a high level of political activity is observed. Brest residents began to search for possibilities to get self-organized. They subscribed to independent Telegram channels, created local chats for group discussions and planning of joint events/actions. Before the beginning of the regular repressions against managers and participants of Telegram chats, in Brest nearly 12,000 persons were subscribers of 14 public chats of the city’s microdistricts. The number of people who participate in closed local chats is not known.

Brest residents’ political activity was rigidly stopped by power structures. As of 1 April 2021, 80 out of 325 political prisoners in Belarus are from the Brest Region (every fourth ². As for this indicator, out of all the regional centers of Belarus, Brest occupied the first place; there were more political prisoners in Minsk only. In the beginning of April 2021, more than 6,000 inhabitants of the Brest Region were detained and brought to the administrative responsibility (fines, days of arrests) for their participation in peaceful mass actions.

¹ This text had been written prior to the beginning of the wave of institutional repressions against NGOs, which started in the summer of 2021; before this wave, the liquidations of and pressure upon the organizations had no mass character.

² According to the human rights defending center «Viasna» // https://t.me/viasna_brest/713

The review of activity of NGOs and civil initiatives in the Viciebsk Region in 2015–2020

Eva Chyrvonaya

Regional subjects exist in the same realities as the whole country does: political, economic, and legal ones. The legal environment in the country still hinders the development of this sector. Despite it, during the specified period, public organizations and initiatives strengthened their influence and organizational potential, and expanded forms and methods of their work with target groups. However, if since 2015 there was a hope of developing and improving the situation, then the year 2020, on the one hand, demonstrated the Belarusians' ability to create grass-roots initiatives and to solve difficult tasks and, on the other hand, cancelled many achievements and questioned the safety of work in the third sector.

Initiatives and events in the Region

Since 2015, in the Viciebsk Voblaść [Region], there worked both skilled representatives of the third sector and a number of new organizations and initiatives that became visible players in their field. Some of initiatives existing for a long time received the official status. Arising initiatives were not afraid of new topics and approaches – they actively used the Internet and social networks to spread and advance their activity.

Viciebsk, as a regional center and the biggest city in the Voblaść [Region], accumulated a big number of subjects.

The initiative Vitebsk4me appeared in 2014 and was registered in 2015 as the social-cultural establishment “Viciebsk For Me”; it is one of the largest organizations in its sphere. Human capital development is one of its key directions. For a specified period, several educational projects in this sphere were implemented:

the course of socially responsible design Vitebsk Social Design; «Viciebsk Ornament» – the course dedicated to city community development; the course of socially-responsible illustrations «Responsible Graphic Arts», etc.

The projects “Creative Thursdays” and “Take Occasion” contributed much to the implementation of actions/events in the city and to the development of cross-sector interaction. There were open meetings where any town dweller and people from the Region could present their idea, receive support and help in the implementation, and to find partners. More than 20 ideas presented within the framework of these meetings were implemented, e.g. the project “Magdeburg Viciebsk”, the festival “Kartonka”, the “Viciebsk Alphabet”, etc.

Since 2018, Vitebsk4me organizes the annual award for activists and city initiatives “Hramadski Furšet”. It also revives the project of street art “Gravitation”, thanks to which nearly 20 street art objects appeared on the walls of city buildings.

The basic player in the environmental sphere is the cultural-educational establishment “Urbanistic Projects And Initiatives Center “Prastora”“. The urbanistic forum “Prastora” is the key action/event of the initiative; it is organized annually since 2016. In different years, participants of this forum studied various aspects of city space development: land art, management of cities, smart city, and others.

In 2020, “Prastora” launched the project “Sustainable management: partnership practices” aimed at uniting efforts of the municipal government and expert organizations, representatives of the working group of the initiative «Agreement of mayors in Viciebsk», and other interested communities, to be implemented at the local level of Agenda-2030 and the Plan of actions of sustainable energy development and climate.

In the social sphere, it is necessary to mention the work of the Viciebsk club house “Wings Of Hope”¹ created in 2016. The club house is a form of social support and rehabilitation of people with mental diseases.

In order to improve the quality of their life, to support each other, senior people of Viciebsk registered the public organization «Golden Age» in 2016. Only in 2017, members of the organization carried out and visited more than 200 actions/events (meetings, excursions, trainings, pool, sauna, etc.).

In 2019, there appeared the social initiative with queer subjects “CLOSET FREE”². Participants of the initiative organized a mini-festival in honor of the

¹ https://vk.com/vitebsk_club_house

² <https://vk.com/closetfreevtbt>

International Day Against Homophobia, exhibitions and public campaigns against discrimination in educational institutions.

During the specified period, the Viciebsk city public association of women “Ulyana”, the Viciebsk branch of “Vstrecha”, the Viciebsk city association «Christian commonwealth of adult and young people», and other experienced players in the field of the third sector continued their work.

Partnership development in the third sector of the Region was contributed to by the Regional resource center of developing additional education of adults in Viciebsk³ created within the ambit of the project of the Association of additional education and the DVV International «Study To Act». In 2016–2019, the center:

- carried out trainings for providers of additional education and civil society organizations;
- rendered its legal and consulting help;
- organized information mass mailing;
- provided its premises and equipment to public organizations and initiatives to carry out actions/events on a gratuitous basis.

Tourist potential of Braslaŭ

The most vivid representative of the third sector in the Braslaŭ Rajon [District] is the socially-informational establishment “Traditions and innovations of Paazie-rië”⁴, registered in 2017. For 4 years, it implemented several large-scale projects supported by the European Union, in partnership with the local authorities. All of them were aimed at developing the sphere of tourism and sustainable development of the District.

In 2019, the project «The branding of Hiermanavičy as a tool of sustainable development of the rural territory: by common efforts for everybody» was implemented. The museum hall dedicated to Jazep Drazdovič received a new exposition; the tourist route “Jazep Drazdovič’s Paths” was opened in the Šarkauš-čyna District. Now, the establishment is a partner of the initiative «Business in your District – support to entrepreneurship in the sphere of manufacturing agricultural production and agro-eco-tourism». Since 2020, the establishment carries out a cycle of actions «Networking in the tourist sector of Braslaŭ as a tool of sustainable development of the territory».

³ <https://vk.com/vitebskrrc>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/poozerje.by>

Also, it is necessary to mark the activity of the cultural-educational initiative “Braslaŭ Dwellers”⁵. In 2016–2019, it implemented a considerable quantity of educational and cultural projects: festivals, photo exhibitions, lectures of “Mova Nanova”; it created a children’s playground.

Development of the Miory Rajon

In 2019–2022, the Miory District Executive Committee, with the support of the European Commission, carries out the project “Together for the community and nature: the strengthening of the development of the Miory District through partnership of the local authorities and civil society”⁶. The project is aimed at creating a mechanism of implementation of the strategy of the sustainable development of the Miory District, built on partnership of the local authorities and structures of civil society. In 2019–2021:

- the social council on the sustainable development of the Miory District is created,
- priorities and requirements of the inhabitants of the District are studied,
- a local initiatives contest is carried out,
- the Miory District brandbook is developed,
- the strategy of sustainable development and the youth strategy are worked out.

In spite of the fact that the project is being implemented by the local authorities, local residents, village councils, and initiatives join it. Within the bounds of the project, two establishments and foundation are registered.

Urbanistics and design in Połacak

In Połacak, during the specified period, the Urbanistics and Design Center⁷ was formed and actively carried out projects. The basic directions of the center are architecture and town-planning, bicycle movement development and infrastructure, advancement of sustainable development ideas among youth, organization of city festivals and picnics. The UDC was a co-organizer of many large actions/events, including the National Architectural Forum of “ArchProSvet”, the architectural school “Transformer”, the hackathon of light installations for the Light

⁵ <https://vk.com/braslaucy>

⁶ <https://euprojects.by/ru/projects/Green-Economy-Environment-and-Sustainable-development/together-for-community-and-nature-miory-district/>

⁷ <https://vk.com/archisearch>

Festival in 2018. In 2019, it organized the festival VUZecoFest at Połacak University. Activists of the center participated in the working-out of the plan of sustainable energy development of the Połacak District, the plan of sustainable city mobility. Also, the UDC regularly carried out educational actions/events and film viewings for students and townsfolk, and annual Days of Poetry and university free-markets.

Throughout the whole period, the organizations well-known for a long time for their activity in the human rights defending sphere continued their work: regional activists of the civic initiative “Belarusan Association of Journalists”, “Belarusan Language Association named after Francysk Skaryna”, the movement “For Freedom”, and others.

Basic tendencies

For the last five years, regional development became a trend of the third sector, which helped to attract resources and to develop the organizations and initiatives. However, small organizations and initiatives could not frequently participate in large donors’ contests in connection with the insufficient quantity of human resources and the level of development of their competences. It is possible to implement large-scale projects if there is human and infrastructural potential and if they are supported by the local authorities.

During this period, the majority of organizations and initiatives worked at the expense of one-two key leaders, whose departure, relocation, or burnout can affect all activity radically.

There was a tendency of creating initiative groups in situ within the scope of national projects, for example – the Belarusian language courses “Mova Nanova” in Viciebsk and Braslaŭ, the work of the initiative groups “Live Library” and “Science Outside” (BFO OO “XCBM”) in Viciebsk, ByCovid19 in Vorša, Połacak, Navapołacak, and other cities.

One more tendency of this period is the transition from work in organizations to work in initiatives, which makes it possible to avoid many bureaucratic complexities. Initiatives often used new ways of attracting resources to implement their activity, for example – participation in the contest of social ideas for Belarus “Social Weekend”, as well as crowdfunding mechanisms.

The year 2020 was marked by the beginning of the pandemic COVID-19. Some organizations managed to re-orient their activity in the online format. For example, Vitebsk4me’s project «Vitebsk On» – online actions/events with

professionals from different spheres from Viciebsk, the creation corona doodles and posters or the development of the online magazine about successful practices of city projects and initiatives: prastora.INFO by the establishment "Prastora".

In connection with the events in August 2020, many organizations were compelled to reconsider their priorities and plans. The further development of the third sector in the Region is hard to predict because of the sharp changes in the legal environment and due to the political events.

Survey of civil society's activity in the Hrodna Region: 2015–2020

Vadzim Saranchukau

For the last five years, the civil society of the Hrodna Voblaść [Region] developed promptly, but it was rather a “development contrary to”. Not the creation of favorable conditions was the merit of the state, but the fact that during a certain period of time the authorities did not just interfere and did not hinder. Already this fact sufficed for the incipience of new initiatives and organizations and for old ones to continue their previous activity. The year 2020 became a double peak – we reached the maximum solidarity and cooperation and were faced with the maximum repressions for a long time.

What are the distinctives of Hrodna and the Region?

The Hrodna Voblaść is traditionally considered the most progressive region of Belarus. It is situated in the west of the country and borders on the European Union countries; it has its traditions of intercourse with them in both formal and informal spheres. Recently, prior to the beginning of the political crisis, the local authorities participated with readiness in many cross-border projects with partners from Poland and Lithuania – particularly in the spheres of tourism, ecology, and transport infrastructure.

The so-called GoNGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations) traditionally participated in cross-border projects, such as the “National Touristic Sports Union” that put its annual participation in such projects actually on professional rails. Cross-border cooperation is also very interesting to small, not very rich neighboring areas of Poland, such as Sokółka, because it helps them to draw European Union's financing.

In Hrodna and the Region, there are a number of active public organizations with wide experience. Among them: the center of information support of public initiatives “Third Sector”, the association of young scientists “BIT”, the Hrodna

children's hospice, "Bicycle Hrodna", and others. Some of them exist since the 1990s and have not stopped their existence and active work despite the adverse political conditions. It is necessary to separately mention the "Union of Poles of Belarus" – one of the largest, oldest, and most active Belarusian organizations, which exists despite the authorities' constant pressure since 1991.

In Hrodna and the Region, there are also local structures of all-Belarusian organizations with a long history such as the "Protection of Birds of Homeland".

2015: the situation in Hrodna, conditions for civil society and new platforms

The 2015 presidential election was one of the most "vegetarian" ones in the newest history of Belarus. Weak oppositional candidates, candidates-spoilers, and strong Lukashenko on their background created a situation when mass repressions against civil society were unnecessary. Also, there appeared the image of the president as a "defender of independence", and the development of pro-Belarusian, first of all – cultural, initiatives was not hindered by the authorities.

On this wave of relative liberalization, in Hrodna, there appeared important for the local community public centers that attracted creative people, activists, educators, journalists, scientists, and other people who wanted to create their projects outside the limits of state-run structures.

In 2015, in Hrodna, the first in the city anti-café (or time-café) was closed; it had been a place for lectures, thematic meetings, concerts, cinema demonstrations, exhibitions, and other activities. It was closed partially for political reasons. However, already in 2015–2016, this platform was substituted with at once three, bigger ones and they in many respects defined the shape of civic Hrodna in the next four years.

The most considerable of them was the "Center of City Life" created by the journalist and activist Paviel Mažeika. At first, the Center shared its premises with another cultural space – the well-known private gallery "Kryha", but soon the latter stopped its existence, and the Center moved to separate, larger and more convenient premises.

In 2016–2020, the Center became a place where there were tens of art and photo exhibitions, presentations of books, concerts; here there passed scientific conferences, courses of the Belarusian language "Language Anew" [Mova Nanova]. Here there were public discussions on topics important for the city: tourism development, inclusive environment, cooperation of public activists with local

authorities, ecology, etc. The Center often hosted all-Belarusan or Minsk's actions/events: the festival of documentary films on human rights "Watch Docs", the festival of the intellectual book "Space", etc. In 2019, the Center was the only platform in Belarus where the exhibition "World Press Photo" was demonstrated.

Two other, somehow similar platforms that appeared in 2015–2016 are the time café "Portal" and the "Store C", which were an attempt to unite small business and public, educational, and cultural activity. The "Portal" began as a board games club, but was soon transformed into a platform with an educational direction. It was used by other Hrodna-based and all-Belarusan initiatives while organizing their events in Hrodna: the "Civic Forum", "Active Is Good", "Live library", InspiredByRegion, "Antibarrier", and others. In a similar way, commercial and public work was combined by the store of traditional souvenirs "Lola" and by the DOM46, a platform where, first of all, the contemporary dancing movement developed.

Experienced actors of the public sphere

During this period, the old public associations worked actively as well. The center "Third Sector" continued its permanent project that exists since 1998 – the "Young Journalist School" that, with time, turned into the "Contemporary Journalism School". Also, "Golden Age University" created according to the examples of western universities of the third age became increasingly popular. The organization, together with the partner "Useful Competences Studio" created in 2014, started new educational programs: Media Management School, Media Literacy School for youth, Media Competences School "PRodvizhenie", youth platform "Hrodna Youth Hub", Social Entrepreneurship School "Good Impact", the campaign "Adult Friendly City", and a number of other initiatives.

The Hrodna children's hospice built cooperation with the authorities and, thanks to the good attitude of the chairman of the Hrodna Executive Committee, received from the state additional premises for its activity.

The public association "Bicycle Hrodna" that exists since 2013 carried out annually the important international bicycle marathon "Neighbors", organized a bicycle school, and since November 2018 was part of the Hrodna City Coordination Council on tourism. Earlier, the organization was also invited by a number of public councils at local bodies of power (which, however, do not work).

The animal protection association “Devoted Heart” that exists since 2011, during the last years, managed to help thousands of homeless animals and made their problem actually visible in society.

Thus, it is impossible to say that 2015–2020 were exclusively positive for civil society. After the prosecution on the part of the police and local officials, the gallery “Kryha” was forced to close. For financial reasons, the gallery “U Maïstra” was closed – it was one of the oldest private galleries in Hrodna. The private gallery “Tiesenhausen” was almost closed.

New initiatives in 2015–2020

More or less good conditions led to the nascency of new initiatives in different spheres. Since 2015, in Hrodna, there appeared the jogging club Run4Fun with its own running school that popularizes a healthy way of life. Since the same moment and until now, in Hrodna, the office of the organization aimed at people’s education “Active Is Good” works. Also, in 2015, in Hrodna, there appeared the all-Belarusian public association “Parents Movement 328” that is engaged in a rather narrow topic – help to the condemned according to anti-narcotic Article №328 of the Criminal Code and the advancement of the idea to decrease the severity of such punishments.

Since 2017, in Hrodna, the public association “Ecomonitoring” works. Its activists organize garbage collection, shoreline cleanup, take analyses of well water to see the level of nitrates, cooperate with state-run structures, and are engaged in other activities on places in order to improve the environmental situation.

The classical for Hrodna topics of charity, help to those who need help, and animal protection kept developing. There appeared a number of new organizations and initiatives in these directions: the center “Belief”, the center “Para”, the Center to help life, “Life Trace”, “Save Life”.

2020: the pandemic, increase, solidarity, and repressions

In the spring of 2020, the fast spread of the coronavirus led to the situation when many organizations reduced their activity. Although the authorities did not introduce any lockdowns or at least small restrictions, activists themselves decided to refuse offline events temporarily. “Golden Age University”, which audience is persons of 55+ y.o. and who are particularly threatened by the coronavirus, for the first time of its 10-year existence, was faced with a problem of enrolling students. The response was to work out “Virtual GAU”.

For the last several years, around the “Center of City Life” and the “Store C”, there gathered a community of active townspeople: public activists, artists, members of political parties, scientists, and others. It resulted in the fact that the “Center” in 2020 played an especial role. It became the headquarters of volunteers who helped physicians. Here, protective outerwear was sewn; face shields were made; personal protective equipment (PPE) for doctors was taken from here and brought to hospitals. The premises of the Hrodna children’s hospice were temporarily turned into a sewing shop to manufacture PPE. Thus, the local authorities did not officially recognize want of defense means, and doctors were compelled to ask for and accept volunteers’ help anonymously, being afraid of punishment on the part of the administration. In spring-summer 2020, volunteers collected about 10,000 face shields; sewed and distributed several thousand defense suits among medical institutions. This example demonstrated that even in a very difficult situation the Belarusians can count on themselves and, in a sense, replace the inefficient state with themselves.

In August 2020, the Center became the headquarters for activists who tried to carry out negotiations with the local authorities. The improvised Council included representatives of the oppositional candidates’ staffs, representatives of public organizations, parties, business, and workers of large factories. It was them who forced the local authorities to have talks and to allow legal rallies for several days on the city main square – under the pressure of the crowd even the city officials and MPs from Hrodna came there once.

When, as a result of the repressions, directors and actors of the Hrodna Drama Theater were fired, in September 2020 the Center of City Life became a new platform for their performances.

The role of the Center in the awakening of public life was certainly noticed by the authorities. In the spring of 2021, the head of the Center Pavieł Mažeika received a criminal case – ostensibly for “Nazism rehabilitation”, and on May, 12th the establishment was liquidated under the decision of economic court. This decision was obviously a political order in order to stop the activity of the popular platform.

The wave of repressions touched the Hrodna children’s hospice, too. Its head Volha Vialička was detained ostensibly for her participation in an unapproved action, and then she received a criminal case for ostensibly the “theft of property of a public organization by misfeasance in office”. In October 2020, Vialička fled to Lithuania. Her prosecution has to do with her active participation in the protests in August 2020 and her open statements anent the rigged election. As a result, the hospice was deprived of some parts of its premises presented to it earlier by the city organizations.

In November 2020, the municipal enterprise cancelled the premises rent agreement with the time-café “Portal”. The founders of this platform connect it with the political situation in the country.

The local Internet edition Hrodna.life covered most actively the life of civil society and wrote about the majority of its initiatives; it was repressed as well. In January 2021, the office of this edition was searched; equipment was confiscated; in March, the edition was fined by more than 12,000 Belarusian roubles for ostensibly “distribution of extremist materials”. One of the oldest independent printed media of the Region – “The Newspaper Słonimskaïa” – was repressed, too. The edition was also deprived of its equipment, and the newspaper management went abroad for six months, but after they returned they did not manage to revive the printing of their newspaper.

The main danger: departure of active people from the country

The result of the summer-autumn 2020 events in Hrodna was, at first, the big increase of public activity and the inflow of new people, and then – the strong counterstroke of the authorities’ repressive machine. However, it did not lead to the utter annihilation of the public sector. The achievements of civil society, certainly, will play their role even when popular platforms are closed by the authorities. A multitude of formal and informal initiatives will be able to continue their existence. The big role in the continuation of the existence of the public sector will be played by the unprecedented solidarity and the feeling of unitedness felt by the Belarusians in 2020.

A certain setback has to do, first of all, with the fact that many active people were compelled to flee in order to escape repressions. The fast outflow of people touched leaders, professionals, students, and activists, who – until the situation in the country does not change – will hardly come back. More than that, in case of another strengthening of repressions, we observe new and new waves of émigrés – emigration saves people from the blow, but weakens civil society’s structures in the country.

The Homiel Region: civil society paused

Iryna Vitkouskaya

In this article, we shall speak of NGOs. The activity of GoNGOs like the Belarusian Red Cross Society or trade union organizations is not within the framework of this text. We shall review associations, establishments, and initiatives of a democratic orientation, which were compelled to suspend its activity in 2020–2021. Such a pause was caused by three factors: the pandemic, emigration of public activists, and repressions.

It is quite problematic to find on open access the official statistics on public associations of Homiel and the Homiel Region. The web-site of the Ministry of Justice presents the information on registered organizations in Belarus as a whole and does not contain any data on the Regions. However, it is possible to say that during the period after 2010 an active growth of new initiatives and public institutions in the Homiel Region was observed. The public activist Jaŭhien Mierkis says, “...then there was a blossom of initiatives because after the 2010 election the political repressions decreased and there appeared new possibilities, new centers of uniting people; social networks gradually started to work.”

The establishment “Center of Regional Development HDF”

The Homiel Democratic Forum (HDF) exists since 2008. In the beginning, it worked as the public initiative “Homiel Democratic Forum”; in 2013, it was registered as an establishment, and now it is officially called the establishment “Center of Regional Development HDF.” Its purpose is to assist socio-political transformations: “Belarusian society has to be strong, active, and responsible; the Belarusian state has to be open, fair, and accountable.”

The director of the establishment Piotr Kuźniacoŭ says that during all the years of its activity they had a strategy aimed at contributing to the sustainable development of Belarus’ regions, “We understand sustainable development as develop-

ment in conformity with the criteria of sustainable development described by the United Nations. That is what is called “Good Governance”. For the sake of it, we organized actions and events in order to increase the role of citizens in decision-making processes, in the planning of development.”

The most remembered campaigns of the HDF during the years of its activity are: city meetings, the youth debate club “Civilization”, and the civil campaign “Navabelica” organized in 2012–2014 by the local activist Halina Kraŭčanka. The campaign was aimed at solving local problems by the forces of the local community.

The HDF city meetings were organized every month in 2016–2019. People gathered to discuss these or those problems of the city and to send their proposals of how to solve these problems to the local authorities. These city meetings in combination with awareness-raising campaigns and public activities were very fruitful. For example, within the pale of such meetings, in 2018, there appeared an idea to create a petition with the requirement to solve one of the most topical problems of the city – to finish the construction of the “East Detour” in order to free the city center. City meetings stopped in 2020 in connection with the pandemic. After the election, repressions began, and any meetings are now dispersed by the authorities.

The establishment “Center of Regional Development HDF” is the owner of two information projects in the Homiel and Mahiloŭ Regions: the web-sites Homiel.today and mogilev.online.

Urbanistic direction

After 2010, initiatives of an urbanistic direction became quite popular. The term “urbanistic activism” started to be applied to any city activity (which is not absolutely correct as originally urbanistics is a narrow scientific sphere that has to do with city planning).

In 2016, there appeared the urbanistic initiative Smart Homel that pursues the aim of uniting people who would like to make the city better. It deals with questions of the city’s development, its transport infrastructure, city appearance, and comfort of residing of all inhabitants. Among the initiatives of Smart Homel is the tidying-up of woods, protection of public gardens in the center of Homiel near the hotel “Tourist” (together with the inhabitants of surrounding houses and other organizations and initiatives), creation of petitions against some initiatives of officials.

The initiator of Smart Homel Jaŭhien Mierkis notices that “the best achievements, unfortunately, have to do with not what we managed to do in the city, so that it would be possible to look at it, but rather with what we managed to beat off, so that it would not be done in the city.” The specificity of numerous city initiatives in Homiel is in the battle against absurd and silly decisions. In Homiel, in the very center of the city, the authorities tried to advance the idea of constructing pedestrian underpasses. And this project meant a large sum of money. Bloggers paid attention to this issue – as a result the implementation of this idea was cancelled. Smart Homel tried to work in a constructive channel. For example, with the help of visual means, it demonstrated what Homiel could look like. It raised the problem of the absence of greenspace in the city. At present, the initiative Smart Homel took a break in connection with the events in the country.

Except for Smart Homel, in the city, there were other urbanistic initiatives, too. For example, “Looking For Old Homiel”. However, the founders of this initiative emigrated, and its activity now is the online format. In Homiel, not many initiatives turned into registered communities or associations – it depended on city activists. That is, an activist was the source of an initiative and its organizer.

It is possible to mention the event dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic (1918), which took place in Homiel thanks to the activity of separate people, but not an organization or an initiative. The event was visible. The celebration began with an excursion to Homiel’s places connected with the BPR and proceeded as a concert – it was necessary to organize a registration as the premises could contain no more than 100 people. The Homiel authorities did not provide a big platform for the concert – therefore, civil society organized a lot of events, meetings, excursions, and concerts dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the BPR.

It is also possible to mention a Belarusian-language Christmas tree event for children in 2015 organized by active people of the city (it gathered 70 people); however, the success of this initiative did not turn into the creation of a community that would be engaged in the advancement of interests of supporters of the Belarusian language.

It is also possible to recall an example of another case when an activist from Homiel created an initiative that spread all over the country. Thus, in reply to the pandemic challenges, the initiative #ByCovid19 aimed at helping physicians was launched in Homiel. Its founder is the human rights defender Andreï Stryżak. In his interview to the Belarusian Radio Racyja, he said how the initiative appeared, “At the end of March, I read an article by doctor Maksim Ačaretni in which

he asked us all to stay at home so that he could work. And I decided to find out whether Maksim had all the necessary things so that he could work. And I found out that there was lack of protection frames, respirators FFP3 in particular. And I started to look for them. This is how it all began.”

The initiative became nation-wide. It existed for three months and then stopped its activity. It managed to collect the sum of 355,000 dollars to help physicians. Andrei Stryżak was compelled to leave Belarus.

Human rights defending initiatives

In Homiel, there are structural subdivisions of the human rights defending center “Viasna” [“Spring”] and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. Also, there is the Strategic Litigation Center that helps Belarusian citizens defend their civil and political rights in the country and in international structures. The center informed the United Nations Human Rights Committee on infringements of people’s rights, rendered legal aid to citizens whose rights were infringed by the Belarusian state. The SLC helps not only inhabitants of Homiel, but of all country. In January 2021, the SLC was forced to stop its activity because its head, Leanid Sudalenka, was arrested and sent to a detention center.

The Homiel branch of the BAJ

The Homiel branch of the BAJ is a regional structure of the Belarusian Association of Journalists. It was created in February 1997. The branch unites journalists of Homiel and has the status of a registered association. Anatol Hatoŭčyc was the first chairman of the organization. In 2018, Mikołā Biańko was elected its chairman.

Except for its inner organizational activity, the branch carries out open city actions/events as well. For example, the Homiel branch re-created in the city the places connected with the eminent literary character created by Ilya Erenburg in his novel forbidden by Soviet censorship – “Lazik Roitshvanets’ Troublous Life.” Thus, in 2018, to the 90th anniversary of this book, the BAJ organized a thematic festival. During it, there was a concert of the Homiel ensemble of Jewish music, an excursion to Lazik Roitshvanets’ places, and a meeting in the Puppet Theater.

In 2019, the BAJ Homiel branch organized the open city conference “Truth about Chernobyl”. It was attended by the chairman of the constant committee on Chernobyl questions of the Supreme Soviet of the 13th convocation Viktor Chomič, the freelance journalist Andrei Miadźviedzieŭ, the editor of the portal

Rynak.by Alaksieï Charkievič, the liquidator Adam Varaniec, and the participant of the movement “Scientists for denuclearized Belarus” Juryi Varoniežcaŭ (in the format of a video interview).

In 2020, during the pandemic, the branch began to carry out its internal actions in the online format. Also, the organization’s activity was affected by the repressions against journalists. Thus, the branch stopped carrying out its open city actions/events.

Language line of activity

After 2010, in Homiel, there appeared two centers that unite supporters of the Belarusian language – “Language Anew Homiel” (“Mova Nanova”; a structural subdivision of the all-national courses “Language Anew”) and the Belarusian Language Center.

“Language Anew Homiel”

In 2014, the language courses “Language Anew” were opened in Homiel. At the beginning, they passed in the branch of the Vietka Museum. Then – in the anti-cafe “Flat”; then – in the art-space “Ark” and in the Belarusian Language Center. The courses were carried out every week, but not in summer. Except for the weekly language classes, city actions/events were organized, too. E.g. in the winter of 2020 there was a language family festival dedicated to the Native Tongue Day. Within the bounds of the program, there were master classes on ceramics, performances of knights, Batleika [Belarusian amateur puppet theatre], performances of bagpipers, and a musical play. However, the pandemic that began in the spring of 2020 forced the courses to go to the online format. In 2021, there were several classes in the offline mode, but then classes were organized in a zoom conference mode. The art space “Ark” and the Belarusian Language Center, where the “Language Anew” classes took place, also because of the pandemic, ceased to work. Accordingly, the Homiel courses were faced with the problem of premises and began to work in the online mode.

Belarusian Language Center

It was initiated by the Homiel city organization of the Belarusian Language Association in 2017. The chairman of the Homiel branch Alesia Aŭłasievič said about the creation of the BLC, “We want very much to have a place where it would be possible to gather together, where it would be possible to carry out

classes, so that it would be on a regular basis, so that to have a library, it would be possible to watch a film or to play a board game. Therefore, this center appeared.”

For the years of its existence, the Center organized film viewings in the Belarusian language, the language classes “ABC”, children’s language classes “Language for children”. Also, the center provided a platform for different initiatives (“Gender Studies” group, “Eco Up” group, courses of the Ukrainian language, “Speak Up” classes).

Regional history and culture studies organization “Tałaka”

It is the oldest non-governmental public organization of Homiel. The main objectives and subjects of Tałaka’s activity, according to its Statute, are: to study, to preserve, and to popularize among young people Belarus’ national culture, history, and regional studies as one of factors of the national revival of Belarus and the construction of a democratic society. The association appeared in 1986. At that time, the city authorities even offered Tałaka premises to choose from in an official building for their meetings. In 2021, the authorities did not offer premises any more; however, the association continued to carry out folklore actions/events such as the carrying-out of folklore holidays: “Spring Calling”, “Kupalle”, “Ščadravańnie”, etc. As of the spring of 2021, it was the only organization that still carried out actions/events in the offline mode.

The organization also organized students to carry out excavations in Grodzisk near Homiel every year, carried out actions against the construction of buildings in the protected zone of the historical areas of the city. Jaŭhien Malikaŭ, the chairman of the organization, was fired from the university, where he was a tutor, in 2021, and the organization suspended its activity.

Thus, as we see, after 2020, all activities in Homiel went to the online mode or took a break. Offline actions/events are rather an exception than a rule.

Public organizations of the Mahiloŭ Region in 2015–2021

The author is a NGO activist

The web-site of the Department of Justice of the Mahiloŭ Region Executive Committee has no generalizing information on the number and structure of registered public organizations in the Voblaść [Region]. However, there is the “List of active local public associations registered by the Department of Justice of the Mahiloŭ Region Executive Committee” d/d 31.12.2020. In this list, there are 91 local organizations of the Mahiloŭ Region. The number of public organizations of the Region also includes branches of national associations, the majority of which are represented in this or that form in the Mahiloŭ Region: branches, local organizations, or regional managers.

While evaluating the activity of public organizations in Belarus, to know the line of activity of an organization is not enough; it is important to know what organizations are really independent and public and which ones actually remained from the Soviet period or were created a priori as an obedient appendage to the state mechanism. After the crisis in 2020 in Belarus, the authorities try again to create “their own” civil society, to governmentalize or to liquidate independent associations. In this article, we shall not consider the obviously state-run public organizations, as well as the activity of NGOs that are in close contact with the state institutions, but concentrate only on the most visible independent NGOs in 2015–2020.

Human rights defending organizations

In the Mahiloŭ Region, during the last decade, the most active national human rights defending organizations have been: the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) and the Human Rights Defending Center “Viasna” [“Spring”]. In Mahiloŭ, the only one in Belarus regional human rights defending organization, the Mahiloŭ Human Rights Defending Center, was registered.

The Belarusian Helsinki Committee always actively participated in the protection of the Belarusians' political rights. Its members were engaged legal training, distribution of legal knowledge, monitoring of elections and trials concerning the revealed infringements. Citizens' appeals were accepted if they, first of all, had to do with infringements of the International Pact on civil and political rights; then – legal aid was rendered. During the protests, the Helsinki Committee helped to legalize observers and volunteers during the election, as well as members of other human rights defending non-registered structures, and rendered legal aid to victims of repressions.

In the Mahiloŭ Region, during the election campaigns within the last decade, the Human Rights Defending Center “Spring” became the most active human rights defending organization. In 2020, it carried out a monitoring and compiled a list of people detained on political grounds; it also rendered concrete help to participants of the protests. For this reason, members of the Center underwent to the most severe – among other human rights defenders – persecution during and after the crisis in 2020.

The public association “Mahiloŭ Human Rights Defending Center” (MHRDC)

In 1998, a group of activists headed by Siarhieï Abadoŭski registered a public association that for almost 25 years has been protecting rights of Mahiloŭ residents. The basic direction of the Center is the protection and legal aid during infringements of the International Pact on civil and political rights, protection of monuments of history and culture of the Mahiloŭ Region. In 2020, the presence of the official certificates of members of the Center helped them and many other activists to be officially engaged in the protection of rights of Mahiloŭ residents and in the volunteer activity, including within the framework of other structures, for example the center “Spring”. The Mahiloŭ Human Rights Defending Center “survived” longer than all the other human rights defending structures and was liquidated in February 2022.

The Mahiloŭ branch of the Belarusian Association of Journalists

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) was always not only a professional community, but a human rights defending organization, too. The Mahiloŭ regional branch was a regional structure of the BAJ. Independent journalists, many of whom had no vocational training, thanks to trainings, master classes, and

seminars, received experience in different spheres of journalism. The Mahiloŭ branch also carried out open actions/events, for example – press clubs on different subjects with participation of Mahiloŭ-based activists. The Mahiloŭ regional community of the BAJ became the winner of the contest “BEST BRANCH 2019”, and the Babruisk community was awarded the special diploma “For purposeful work to unite the community”. In 2020, during the pandemic, the branches started to carry out internal actions in the online format and occasionally in the off-line format. After the BAJ was liquidated in August 2021, the official work of the Mahiloŭ branch was suspended; there are only informal contacts and meetings.

Environmental associations

Mahiloŭ-based activists supported actively the preservation of the environment in the park Padmikolle (failed), to provide the Piačerski Forest Park with the status of zakaznik [special nature reserve] (successfully), to protect the bottom land of the River Dubravienka, against the harmful influence of manufacture of the firm “Omsk Carbon” in Mahiloŭ. The problem of the influence of the southern industrial zone on Mahiloŭ’s ecology remains the main issue for ecologists today. There are regular environmental examinations of new investment and town-planning projects.

On April, 18th, 2019, at the initiative of the Public City Council, there was the round table “Ecology of Mahiloŭ: challenges and solutions” that gathered almost all independent environmental initiatives and organizations interested in environmental problems. Representatives of the Public City Council, the Mahiloŭ regional department of the public organization “Belarusian Geographical Society”, “Eco-partnership”, “ENDO”, “Eco-project”, the head of environmental initiatives from the Belarusian Language Association, the club of fans of history and travel “Magic Memories”, “For healthy Mahiloŭ”, the Green Alliance, “SPP”, the Center of City Initiatives, “Padmikolle”, representatives of educational institutions, BAJ, and representatives of the parties UCP and BCD, became participants of the round table.

Participants agreed to discuss the questions of the creation of a coordination council on environmental problems, to send representatives to working groups aimed at working out a regional strategy of sustainable development, to create a judicial-legal group, an information group for an extensive discussion of problems, to inform the wide public on the results of the activity of the coordination council, to carry out interactive (dialogue) activity. Unfortunately, the process of creating

the coordination council of Mahiloŭ-based ecologists was not completed, and the events of 2020 definitively suspended the coordination of ecologists' activity in connection with the mass departure of activist from Mahiloŭ.

Urbanistic direction

The Mahiloŭ Public City Council is a civic initiative, which purpose is the activization of the local community and the consolidation of the city's intellectual forces in socially important activities. The initiative was most successful in the advancement of ideas of local self-rule. The City Council united a stable group of Mahiloŭ-based experts who are engaged in the researching of socially-economic processes and the planning of regional development. It carried out several scientific-practical conferences in 2012, 2015, and 2017.

The organization searched quite actively for forms of implementing its tasks in 2015–2016. Members of the City Council actively participated in discussions of the project of a new general plan of development of Mahiloŭ and made their proposals. A new splash of its activity happened in 2019 when there were a number of round tables and public hearings on environmental, historical, language, and social problems.

Another initiative of the Public City Council was to let the public elect the "Person" and the "Event" of the year in Mahiloŭ; the awarding of winners was traditionally carried out on the day when the city received the Magdeburg Right (on January 28th).

Similar city councils were created in Horki, Kryčaŭ, Klimavičy, and Škłoŭ. The activity of the Škłoŭ City Council is most known and indicative.

The City Initiatives Center (CIC) is a cultural establishment, which aim is to initiate and help implement various projects in the sphere of culture and urbanistics. It is a sui generis expert-manager initiative in this sphere in Mahiloŭ.

In 2015, the first in the country CIC, together with the Mahiloŭ city history museum, implemented the project of wi-fi free distribution in the Glory Square. In 2017, the "Event of the Year" was CIC project of street art "Poems on Walls". The CIC festivals "Dranikfest" and "Big City Picnic" became Mahiloŭ's brands. The street art projects are still in Mahiloŭ.

In the autumn of 2015, there appeared the idea of the City Initiatives School. That was how the first "Hothouse" appeared – the school of activating and attracting the townsfolk to implement projects in the sphere of city activism by creating a community of managers of city projects. For 4 years, within the pale of

the School, more than 34 socially important projects useful to the city were implemented.

The urbanistic orientation of the organization was very essential. In 2016, the concept of developing the bicycle movement in the city of Mahiloŭ was created. In 2017, there appeared the discussion platform “City Dialogues” and the “Laboratory of local activism”, where all those interested had a possibility to discuss vital topics of the city’s development.

Cultural organizations and initiatives

The campaign “Budźma [Let’s Be] Belarusians!” is the most successful product of the International Public Society “Belarusans’ World Association «Bačkaŭščyna»” («Homeland»). In Mahiloŭ, Horki, Babruisk, and Kryčaŭ, it carried out talk shows, “Fairs of Projects”, and helped to search for means to implement ideas and plans of local activists, most actively in 2015–2017.

The Mahiloŭ regional branch of the Union of Belarusian Writers (UBW) united almost all independent Belarusian-language writers of the Region. Since 2013, the branch published its literary almanac “Brama” [“Gate”]; by 2019 there were 7 issues. The publication and presentations of “Brama” in state-run and non-state establishments restored the literary life of the Mahiloŭ Region, made Belarusian writers with independent positions and critical thinking more well-known, expanded authors’ contacts with their colleague in the country and abroad.

The Mahiloŭ branch of the Belarusian Geographical Society exists since 1956. It restored its activity in 1995 and since then became one of the most sustainable and authoritative organizations of the Region. Its activity results were regularly published on pages of the organization’s scientific magazine “Mahiloŭ Meridian”. It carried out scientific-practical conferences, seminars, public discussions, and round tables on various aspects of sustainable development, circular economy, and development of agro-eco-tourism. Members of the organization organized trips and expeditions all across the Mahiloŭ Region and Belarus. The organization increased its activity every year. If in 2015–2016 it carried out or participated on the average in 20 sessions, actions, events per year, then in 2017 – in 90, in 2018 – in 50, in 2019 – in 80. After the events of 2020, the organization’s work turned into online meetings.

The club of fans of Belarusian history and travel “Magic Memories” was created in 1994. Members of the club not only travelled across Belarus and other important for the Belarusians places of the world, but also carried out numerous events and

celebrations, created a number of exhibitions, including mobile ones: “Architecture of Belarus”, “Maksim Bahdanovič’s Paths”. Members of the club became heads of other Mahiloŭ-based organizations and initiatives. In the course of time, the activity of the club decreased; the COVID-19 pandemic turned it into a community of friends.

Belarusian Dances is a Mahiloŭ-based initiative that organized and taught national dances. Despite the departure of several leaders after 2020 from Mahiloŭ, it continues its activity, regularly organizes Belarusian dances parties. A similar initiative worked in Babruisk as well. The project “Party: national dances in Babruisk”, which creates a possibility to join traditional culture through dances and joint recreation, even won at the contest of ideas “Babruisk is the cultural capital 2017” during the carrying-out of a “Fair of Projects”.

Language direction

The Mahiloŭ regional organization of the national public association “Association of the Belarusian language named after F. Skaryna” was not engaged in the carrying-out of concrete actions/events; it gathered irregularly, but it provided legislative grounds for the activity of other ABL city and regional communities and supported grass-roots initiatives.

Among the concrete actions of the regional organization, it is possible to mention the carrying-out of an intellectual competition for pupils called “Belarusian pentathlon”. In 2015–2016, the ABL Mahiloŭ regional organization rendered organizational help to the implementation of the project “Magdeburg Right in the Mahiloŭ Region”. Its city and regional communities most actively worked in Asipovičy, Krasnapolle, Mahiloŭ, and Škłoŭ.

The ABL Mahiloŭ city organization, unlike its regional branch, was engaged in concrete actions and work with its members: it carried out numerous celebrations of memorable dates and meetings with Belarusian-language writers, actors, and singers; it annually organized a national dictation dedicated to the Native Tongue Day on February 21; it organized various trips and regional studies all across Belarus, etc. Thanks to it, Belarusian-language classes were created in Mahiloŭ; the contest “March Echo” dedicated to the World Day of Poetry was carried out regularly; they erected the cross on the place of the mass execution of innocent people by the NKVD [People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs] (organizer Uładzimir Puchoŭski); it was engaged in the protection of monuments and memorable places in Mahiloŭ.

Appreciable work was also conducted by the ABL Asipovičy and Škłoŭ regional branches.

Mova Nanova [Language Anew]. In 2014, in Mahiloŭ and Babruisk, the language course “Language Anew” was opened; it is a branch of the national organization. Like in other cities, classes were carried out in the form of a game, with the invitation of guests, thanks to which students saw and listened to many interesting figures, musicians, and writers.

Women’s Movement. Women of the Mahiloŭ Region very actively participate in public life of the Region. In many public independent organizations, they occupied leadership positions, but there are still not many female organizations per se. A pleasant exception is the Mahiloŭ-based female initiative “Snowdrop”.

The female center “Snowdrop” is a club of women-professionals from public associations of the Mahiloŭ Region, who carry out gender, economic, and cultural educational programs through a club form of activity and a creative approach.

Its activists worked actively not only in Mahiloŭ, but also in Districts. Thanks to their connections and events/actions, in February 2018 the Club of Female Leadership in Horki was created. The activity peak was in 2020, when they implemented lots of concrete events/actions. Together with activists from Babruisk, they started to manufacture masks, attracted many volunteers, educated them and distributed masks together with information leaflets among inhabitants of Babruisk. They helped to publish a book of Belarusian poems, songs, and novels for kids – “Magic Names” by Juryi Niešciarenka. In Horki, they created a crisis center of emotional and psychological relax. In Bychaŭ, they opened an art café where activists, together with people with disabilities and senior people, make art products for different town establishments, discuss public problems and successes, offer solutions, plan their implementation, drink coffee with cakes all together. A similar community was created in Białyničy, too.

In connection with the departure of the leader of the community “Snowdrop”, its activity passed in the online format for the purpose of preserving the community.

Resource centers and platforms

The Center “Circle” (earlier – “the Circle of Friends”) was a resource organization, and today it is an independent space for cultural and political events/actions in Mahiloŭ. Last years, on Mondays, here there were national dances and songs, on Tuesdays – the “Language Anew”, on Wednesdays – a discussion club, on Thursdays – the Association of the Belarusian Language, and on Fridays – a meet-

ing or a concert. The concert of Žmicier Vaïciuškievič on the New Year's Eve became one of the most mass event – there were more than 150 people. In 2019–2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and repressions after the protests, the center considerably reduced the number of its events and right now it is almost closed.

Similar centers were created in cities and District towns: Babruisk, Kryčaŭ, Škłoŭ (the noncommercial organization “Public Center “Bridge”), Horki, Čerykaŭ. They were independent platforms for meetings of active citizens and organizations of the democratic community. The most dynamical and successful among them was the anti café “1368”(Babruisk) that during the last years began to play in the city the role of a center aimed at organizing various public actions/events.

Summing up, it is necessary to underline that the public activity of various public associations of inhabitants of the Mahiloŭ Region in 2015–2020 grew, which was revealed, inter alia, in the fact of public activists' participation in the political protests against violence and for fair elections in 2020. In the Region, despite the improbable difficulty of the legal registration in the state structures of independent public organizations, there worked a small, but quite significant in Belarus' political reality number of organizations, communities, and initiatives. As for their orientation, they represented most different fields of activity: from trade-union, veteran, and sports ones to charitable, cultural, human rights defending, environmental, female, and youth ones.

Like all across the country, in 2020–2021, the civil society of the Mahiloŭ Region had serious losses. The majority of independent NGOs presented in this survey was liquidated, or lowered/suspended its activity, which was caused by the emigration of public activists and repressions, as well as by the coronavirus pandemic. Their activity partially went to the online format. As of today, public activity is extremely rare.



Anarchists' action (Minsk)



Anarchists' action (Minsk)



Braslian street flash mob (Minsk)



Art exhibition – Kuropaty (Minsk)



The Evening of remembrance of Vaclav Havel (Minsk)



The Book store of Lohvinau –a book presentation (Minsk)



Prost of Mothers against rape (Minsk)



The night of poets – Kuropaty



The night of poets – Kuropaty



Arbishop Tadevush Kandrushevich – Kuropaty



Jerzy Gedroyc Award



An Event of The Association of Belarusian Language



Ceremonial burial of generals of the January Uprising (among them Kastus Kalinowski)
Vilnius, November 21st, 2019



MOVA Festival



Part 2

The political crisis of 2020 and its consequences

Chapter A

Phenomenon 2020: conditions and characteristics

The Year 2020: The calendar of events

07 May – the Homiel-based entrepreneur and blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky in his statement on his Youtube channel «The Country For Life» declared his intention to participate in the presidential campaign.

08 May – the House of Representatives of the National Assembly appointed the date of the carrying-out of the presidential election on August, 9th, 2020, which launched the election campaign.

08 May – the diplomat and founder of the Belarusian High Technologies Park Valeriy Tsepikalo declared his intention to take part in the presidential election.

12 May – the banker, chairman of the Board of the Belgazprombank Victor Babariko declared his intention to participate in the presidential race.

15, 19, and 20 May – there were sessions of the Central Election Committee, during which the candidates' initiative groups were registered; in total – 15 initiative groups were registered (the initiative group of one of the popular candidates, Sergei Tikhanovsky, was refused registration, after which the registration documents were quickly submitted by his wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya).

29 May – during a pre-election picket in Hrodna, Sergei Tikhanovsky was detained – he was the leader of the initiative group of the presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Soon, he was accused within the case of the organization of actions that severely infringe public order.

11 June – a criminal case (tax evasion) was initiated against a number of employees of the Belgazprombank. There were several searches in the bank; 15 former colleagues of Victor Babariko, who had left the position of head of the bank earlier, were detained.

18 June – employees of the Investigation Committee of the Republic of Belarus detained Victor Babariko and his son Eduard Babariko. In the evening of the same day, in Minsk, there appeared a chain of people to demonstrate their solidarity with these arrested persons.

14 July – the Central Election Committee confirmed the final list of five candidates for President. It included: Andrei Dmitriyev, Anna Kanopatskaya, Alexander Lukashenko, Sergei Cherechen, and the blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky's spouse – Svetlana. The two presidential candidates were not registered: Valeriy Tsepkalo (during the campaign, he collected about 160,000 signatures in his support – while the required minimum is 100,000) and Victor Babariko (collected about 435,000 signatures). It caused protests all across Belarus, as a result of which 250 persons were detained.

16 July – the election campaign teams of the non-registered presidential candidates Victor Babariko and Valeriy Tsepkalo, as well as Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's election campaign team declared that they got united. The so-called «female coalition» became the «faces» of the united Staff that consisted of the representative of Babariko's team Maria Kolesnikova, the representative of Tsepkalo's team – his wife Veronica Tsepkalo, as well as the presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. They say that they united in order to implement civic control over the course of voting and to carry out a new election in case of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's victory.

From July 19th to August 8th there were several rather mass rallies in support of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and the «female triumvirate»; it was often impossible to carry out rallies allowed by law because of far-fetched obstacles. The most multitudinous rally took place on July 30th in Minsk. According to the Human Rights Defending Center «Viasna» [«Spring»], there were more than 60,000 people. Thus, the officially voiced figure is much more modest – about 18,000.

09 August – the election day. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's supporters gathered near their voting precincts waiting for the total protocols of voting. In the evening, the official sources declared that about 80% of the Belarusians voted for Alexander Lukashenko. On the streets of many cities, there happened mass protest actions. In Minsk, the area around the Stele «Minsk – Hero City» became the basic point of protesters' gathering. That was where the protesters' serious skirmishes with the forces of law and order occurred. Sound and flash grenades, rubber bullets, and some other special means were used against the protesters, as a result of which the protesters were traumatized in various degrees. Also, it was reported on several thousands of arrested persons on the night of 9th to 10th August.

10 August – the Central Election Committee declared the official preliminary results of the election, according to which Alexander Lukashenko won with the result of 80,23%. In the evening, the protests of those who did not agree with such election results continued. They led to new clashes with the police, OMON [riot

police], and internal troops. In the late evening, near the metro station “Pushkinskaya” in Minsk, Alaksandr Taraikoŭski died because of an open wound of the thorax received as a result of shots from the traumatic weapon of employees of power departments. Taraikoŭski’s death became the first case of a protester’s death confirmed by the authorities. Subsequently, the number of the victims who died because of the police violence will be, according to certain data, 8 persons.

11 August – in her video statement, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said that she had left Belarus. The day before, she went to the Central Election Committee to submit a complaint against the election results, after which she disappeared. In big cities, the protests continued. The same day, there were reports on the first cases of announced strikes at Belarusian enterprises.

14 August – Svetlana Tikhanovskaya declared the creation of the Coordination Council «to provide the transfer of power». Arrested protesters start to be released in large quantities from the detention center Okrestina in Minsk. Near Okrestina, there appears volunteers’ help and support camp. Numerous facts of beatings and tortures of persons arrested during the protests become known.

16 August – in Minsk there was the first large-scale «Sunday march»: «the March for Freedom» gathered several hundreds of thousands of people (by different estimations – from 400 to 500 thousand). Many thousand protest actions took place in Baranavičy, Biełaaziorsk, Babruisk, Barysaŭ, Brest, Viciebsk, Vaŭkavysk, Homiel, Hrodna, Drahichyn, Žabinka, Žodzina, Zasłaŭje, Kleck, Kaściukovičy, Kryčaŭ, Lida, Łahoisk, Marjina Horka, Mahiloŭ, Mazyr, Masty, Navapołacak, Pinsk, Połacak, Pružany, Rečyca, Smalavičy, Smarhoń, and other settlements of the country.

17 August – there were numerous reports on strikes all across the country, including such giants as the BelAZ, Minsk tractor factory, Belaruskaliy, Minsk factory of wheel tractors (MZKT), and other enterprises of the industry. Also, the beginning of a strike was declared by 600 employees of the Belarusian TV and Radio Company, the largest state-run establishment of the broadcasting mass media.

23 August – in Minsk there was the next mass protest action: «the March of New Belarus», i.e. the second Sunday march. By different estimations, there were from 300 to 500 thousand participants. The same day, mass actions took place in many other cities of Belarus.

29 August – in Minsk there was «the Female March» that gathered about 10,000 people. Women’s “Saturday” marches became regular events for a period of time along with the Sunday actions in the Belarusian protest calendar.

30 August – on Sunday in Minsk and other cities there was the protest action called the «Peace and Independence March». In the capital, several hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took part in it.

31 August – the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, the archbishop of Minsk- Mahiloŭ Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, who was coming back from a working trip, was not allowed to return to Belarus.

06 September – in Minsk the carrying-out of the next Sunday protest action – «the Unity March» was declared; the number of participants of the protest actions in Minsk remains approximately at the same level.

07 September – in Minsk, unknown persons detain Maria Kolesnikova, the representative of Babariko's team and a member of the Coordination Council. Later, the authorities spread the information that Maria's detention occurred on the Ukrainian-Polish border when she was trying to flee. As it was found out later, the authorities tried to forcibly deport Maria Kolesnikova together with her two colleagues, but Kolesnikova put a crimp in this scheme by tearing her passport on the border.

13 September – this Sunday in Minsk and other cities there were traditional mass protest actions. In Minsk there was «the March of Heroes».

20 September – the next Sunday march («the Justice March») took place all across Belarus.

23 September – Alexander Lukashenko carried out his own inauguration. This event was not announced in advance; reports on it appeared only on the day it was carried out. In the evening of the same day, in reply to this «secret inauguration», spontaneous protest actions took place in the country.

27 September – in the capital and other cities of the country there passed Sunday protest actions («National Inauguration of the real President», or «the March of 97%»). Despite the adverse weather conditions, in Minsk, by different calculations, from several tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of people took part in it.

04 October – on the first Sunday of the month, the opposition declared the next action called «the March to free political prisoners». This day, in Minsk, a part of demonstrators went to the pre-trial detention center on the 1st Zavulak [Lane; Bystreet] named after Boris Okrestin, which after the brutal crackdown on 9–11 August became the place symbolizing these tragic events.

05 October – in Minsk there was the first march of pensioners: several hundreds of senior persons walked the main Prasppekt [Prospect; Avenue] of the capital

chanting «Grandmothers – with the people!», «Pensioners – for changes!», and other political slogans. For a period of time, similar actions will regularly take place on Mondays.

10 October – in the KGB pre-trial detention center, Lukashenko carried out a «round table» with the arrested oppositional leaders, among whom there were Victor and Eduard Babarikos, Sergei Tikhanovsky, Maksim Znak and others. According to reports, during this conversation that lasted for several hours, no agreements were reached.

11 October – in Minsk and other cities there was the «Pride March». In Minsk, during its crackdown, agents of national security applied stun grenades, water cannons, paintball bullets, bludgeons, pepper spray, etc.

13 October – the leader of the Belarusian opposition Svetlana Tikhanovskaya declared Lukashenko «the national ultimatum» with the demands to leave the post of the president, to stop the violence on the streets, and to free all political prisoners until October, 25th. In case it is not done, she announced the all-national strike on October, 26th.

15 October – in the capital there was a march of people with disabilities. Such actions will periodically take place in Minsk.

18 October – there passed the next, still mass enough, Sunday action under the name of «the Guerrilla March». Protest actions also took place in Viciebsk, Homiel, Navapolacak, Hrodna, Žodzina, and other cities.

25 October – there was the Sunday march dedicated to the last day of the “national ultimatum” announced by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. For the last several weeks, it was the most multitudinous action of the opposition; according to some data, it managed to gather more than 100,000 protesters.

28 October – a member of the Presidium of the Coordination Council, diplomat Pavel Latushko declared the creation of the National Anti-crisis Management (NAM) that is meant to render practical help to Tikhanovskaya’s Staff and the Coordination Council in the achievement of the planned purposes – the beginning of negotiations and the securing of stability in the country at the moment of power transition to democratic forces. This structure will become one of the main oppositional centers formed in emigration.

01 November – in Minsk there passed the Sunday action called «Dziady. The March against Terror». This time, people went to the memorial of victims of Stalin repressions in Kurapaty. This march was not as mass as the one last Sunday, but according to some data several tens of thousands of people took part in it. This day, peaceful actions passed in all regional and some big cities of Belarus.

08 November – in different parts of the country and in Minsk there were various Sunday actions. The general name of these actions was «the People Power March». According to the Human Rights Defending Center “Viasna” [“Spring”], during this day, agents of national security detained about a thousand protesters.

12 November – in the morning, Raman Bandarenka died in the intensive care department – he was an inhabitant of one of the «protest courtyards» in Minsk (the so-called «Square of Changes»). The day before, he was beaten by people in mufti when he tried not to allow them to remove white-red-white ribbons from a fence, which had been placed there by protesters. In the evening, about a thousand people indignant at his death gathered on the «Square of Changes». On the place of this tragedy, there appeared a spontaneous memorial: people brought flowers, condolence lamps, and candles.

15 November – in Belarus there passed Sunday protest actions. They received the name «the March of the Brave People» and were dedicated to the memory of Raman Bandarenka. In Minsk, the protests were broken up brutally; people’s memorial to Raman was destroyed. Law enforcement officers surrounded hundreds of people who had gathered to reverence the memory of Raman Bandarenka, applied stun grenades and rigidly detained people.

22 November – there were Sunday actions under the general name «the March against Fascism». This time, a new decentralized format of carrying out actions was suggested: people did not gather in one place, but – instead – the protesters gathered in their courtyards and then went to their own places of gathering in their city microdistricts. Groups of protesting people gathered practically in all microdistricts of the city.

29 November – in Minsk and other cities there was «the March of Neighbors». In the capital, this action passed according to the scenario of the last Sunday – without gathering in one place.

03 December – the authorities deprived the largest news and information Internet portal Tut.by of the status of mass media. This event meant the beginning of the campaign aimed at destroying this Internet media.

06 December – the 120th day of the protests in Belarus. This protest Sunday, inhabitants of Minsk and other cities organized local protest actions united under the name «the Liberty March».

13 December – the opposition announced «the March of People’s Accusation»: in the capital, people gathered in courtyards and tried to go to the places of gathering in microdistricts, but law enforcement officers did not allow them to do

it. In Minsk, for the first time in several months, the authorities did not disconnect the Internet and did not close the metro stations on Sunday.

20 December – in different places of the country, there passed the actions called «the March of People’s Tribunal». Local protests were observed in various areas of Minsk, as well as in Brest, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Barysaŭ, Navapolacak, Salihorsk, Šmīlavičy, Radaškovičy, and other cities. People walked the streets in small columns and built «solidarity chains».

27 December – the first Sunday march that had not been announced: actions in different areas began at dawn and continued till the evening; concrete plans for this day had not been declared.

According to the data published on the web-site of the Human Rights Defending Center “Viasna” [“Spring”], since the beginning of the presidential election campaign and till the end of 2020, the total number of people arrested for their participation in the protest actions in Belarus was more than 33,000 persons; the majority of them received administrative arrests and large fines.

Since August 8th to December 31st 2020, according to the Human Rights Defending Center “Viasna” [“Spring”], more than 650 criminal cases were initiated – they have to do with the events that happened during and after the presidential election. 169 accused people were recognized political prisoners by the Belarusian human rights defending community.

Social preconditions of the Belarusian Revolution 2020

Henadz Korshunau

The social revolution, which flooded the streets in Belarus with large-scale protest activities in 2020, was a result of a number of social changes accumulated in Belarusian society. These changes ripened for many decades, gradually aggravating the asynchronism in the development of the two different social subjects: evolved society and conservative-reversionary power.

In this text, we offer a scheme of describing the changes in society, which led to the explosive social dynamics after the presidential election in 2020. Within the framework of this scheme, there are three levels of social changes that provoked society's abrupt transition to a new level of its development:

- The first level – **formational**, i.e. a complex of “slow” changes that began in the 1990s and created a basis for social transformations,
- The second level – the level of **strategic** social changes that generated organizational-motivational conditions for protest dynamics,
- The third level – an array of social changes that were caused in many respects by casual events and that became **direct triggers** of the social revolution in 2020;

The formational social changes, which cardinally transformed Belarusian society, include at least three interconnected processes that started in the Soviet period and that almost reached its plateau in the 21st century.

First, this is the process of Belarus' fast *urbanization* that began after the end of World War II. During the post-war years, for half a century, the urban population share grew practically by 1% per year (from 21,0% in 1950 to 69,7% in 2000). In the new millennium, the urbanization rates fell more than twice, and the number of the urban population was almost stabilized (the growth of the urban population share rather happened at the expense of the decrease of the number of the rural population). According to the data in 2021, the share of Belarus' urban population was 77,9%, thanks to which Belarus is considered one of the most urbanized countries in Europe.

The urbanization level, delay of the urban population growth, and the fact that it reached its plateau define the anchorage of principled socio-cultural transformations in society: changes in the distribution and structure of employment of the population, in the ratio of working and non-working hours, in professional and general mobility, in social standards, in the structure of values, and in the consistent pattern of functioning of mass consciousness. All these transformations allow us to speak about the becoming of a new type of culture – urban and civic culture that supplants traditional types of culture¹.

In many respects, the formation of these phenomena was possible thanks to the fact that in Belarus the urbanization processes were taking place synchronously with other processes². In this case: with the processes of industrial modernization and the development of a multilevel education system.

Thus, the second process inwrought with the first one is *industrialization*. By the time of the disintegration of the USSR, the Byelorussian SSR reached the peak of its industrial possibilities. At that time, the industrial leaders of the Republic reached their rated capacity; there was almost no budget deficit; the consumer market was rather balanced.

During the recessionary 1990s, the intellect-consuming branches of the national economy suffered; however, total deindustrialization did not occur and, as a whole, the industrial potential was preserved. This preserved level sufficed to continue the tendencies aimed at decreasing the share of agriculture³ and increasing the indicators of sphere of services in the gross national product. And when time came, it sufficed to start a gradual transition of industrialization to a new level – digital.

Therewith, in power structures, there were processes that cannot be called classical for an industrial society, especially in its developed condition. We mean: support of the exclusive position of the state-run sector in the economy; destruction of the political opposition; constant pressure upon civil society; monopolization of the information-communication sphere. Here, a special marker is the creation of a specialized administrative vertical (including its ideological branch)

¹ Koršunaŭ H. Preconditions and trends of Belarusian society's protest dynamics // Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Kadr Menedżerskich (Zeszyt Nr 7/2021) – c. 129–140.

² Tatiana Vadalazhskaya and Uladzimir Matskevich, Quality and way of life in Belarus: evolution and possibilities of transformation [online] <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/65/58/Book_Life_Quality_rus.pdf> [access: 31.12.2021]

³ The decrease of the share of agriculture in the GNP began in the mid-2000s. Thus, in the 1990s this indicator was 22,7%, in 2005 – 8,3%, and in 2021 – 6,8% (Agriculture of Belarus: statistics digest. – Minsk, 2021).

suitied for earlier stages of industrial society, rather close to a traditional agrarian society.

And the third process of the formational level is the *educational level growth*. Thanks to the purposeful policy of mass literacy accepted at the state level in the post-war years, illiteracy in Belarus was almost liquidated in the 1960s⁴. After that, the process of increasing the educational level of the population passed into a new format – the share of persons with elementary education began to decrease and the number of Belarusians with higher education began growing⁵. According to the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, in 1999–2020, the share of people with higher education increased almost twice (from 14,0% to 26,5%), and the number of citizens with initial or basic education decreased practically four times (from 27,2% to 7,2%)⁶. If to put these moments together, it turns out that during this time the ratio of the “educated” to the “uneducated” has changed seven times (from 0,52 to 3,69) in favor of people with higher education.

If to summarize the consequences of the transformations of this level, they can be designated as a precondition for a cultural drift towards pro-democratic values and civic self-consciousness. Social changes of the strategic level are connected, first of all, with the influence of primary digitalization observed in Belarus in the mid-2000s. At that time, the degree of development of the network infrastructure started to provide the availability of the Internet for the general public. Thanks to that, as for the rates of internetization, Belarus was among the European leaders both in the late 2000s⁷ and in the early 2010s⁸.

However, in the context of the Belarusian Revolution in 2020, we think that the following “umbellate” results of the digitalization will be the essentially important

⁴ In 1920, on the territory of the Republic, more than a half of the population (52,6%) at the age of 9–49 were illiterate. In 1939, this indicator decreased down to 19,2%, and in 1970 – down to 0,8%. The censuses in 1989 and 1999 already demonstrated that this indicator is stable at the level of less than 0,4% (persons who could not master the necessary minimum of knowledge due to their physical or psychic features of development (Shakhotko L.P. Dynamics of the number and structure of the population of Belarus [in:] Basic challenges of demographic safety: similarities and distinctions in Moldova and Belarus. – Chişinău, 2010).

⁵ In 1970, the number of people at the age of 15 and older, with the initial educational level, was a tad more than 25%; with higher education – less than 5%; in the 1990s – these shares were at the level of 12–13% both.

⁶ The author’s calculations based on the data of “Education in the Republic of Belarus. Statistics digest”. – Minsk, 2013.

⁷ Andrei Vardomatsky: The Internet audience in Belarus grows as nowhere else in Europe [online] <https://clck.ru/YHFga> [access: 20.09.2021]

⁸ The Belarusians look for alternative information on the Internet and in satellite television programs [online] <http://surl.li/akxss> [access: 25.09.2021]

derivatives from the degradation of borders (territorial, cultural, professional, etc.) and the general acceleration of speeds of social transactions, the decrease of the importance of various intermediaries and open possibilities for an individual initiative, which were caused by this digitalization.

1. Digitalization and complicity of daily life – consecutive processes of computerization, networkization (“internetization”) and smartphonization of society lead to a digital “doubling” of practically all everyday practices.

The absence of norms and poly-variability of digital space (especially of its network segment) provide a person with vast experience of choice among several alternatives, responsibility for this choice, and self-education following the results of such choices – from game-related and entertaining to educational and labor-related alternatives. On the one hand, such digital background is gradually accumulated and transferred to one’s off-line activity; on the other hand – social networks present a lot of possibilities to unite such individual experiences in a collective background, thus forming new types of social non-hierarchical horizontal relations that are embodied in various communities and collaborations. They also begin as “virtual” ones, but then go to off-line space in the form of certain projects, communities, and organizations.

In Belarusian conditions, the digitalization of daily life not only resulted in the individualization of life practices and built new systems of connections between pro-active subjects (network culture and network communities). In the conditions of the repressive regime, this digitalization provided a possibility of developing the attitude called “esse in freedom”⁹, both individually and collectively.

2. Digitalization of the economy – with the increase of rates of scientific-technical progress in the economies of developed countries, there appear new spheres, directions, and business models, which leads to a change of systems of management per se. Because of the conservatism of the Belarusian power systems, the first who started to develop these spheres, directions, and business models was the private sector; the state-run enterprises adapt for the new conditions much more slowly. As a result, the private sector began to play an essential role in the formation of Belarus’ GNP, in the providing of the population with jobs and more

⁹ Andrei Vardomatsky: The Internet audience in Belarus grows as nowhere else in Europe [online] <https://clck.ru/YHFga> [access: 20.09.2021]

worthy salaries¹⁰. People's attitude to business has changed – instead of a “speculator”, now it is the one who provides workplaces and pays worthy salaries.

Together with the changes at the level of daily life, all that leads to the incipency of rather an essential stratum of people who are not just ready, but able to make their own independent choice and to assume responsibility for it.

3. Media space decentralization – in 2019, for the first time since the moment when Internet resources connected to media space, network sources (all sources as a whole: news and thematic portals, social networks and forums, messengers and news aggregator, etc.) surpassed television in the degree of importance¹¹. As for the degree of trust, the Internet outstripped television two years earlier¹².

As a result, the information field ceased to be centralized; the state lost its monopoly on the information-interpretation force. The first place in the sphere of the symbolical and information-communication framing of the world was now occupied by the Internet portals without censorship, social networks and messengers that work according to participational logic and that destroy the opposition of “the correspondent – the recipient”.

The development of organizational and infrastructural conditions for individual and collective subjectivization was the cumulative result of the social changes of strategic character¹³.

To completely understand the social changes that led to the irreversible changes in Belarusan society, it is necessary to mention a set of triggers that directly provoked the explosive character of the social dynamics in 2020.

Both from historical and logic points of view, the first place belongs to the actualization of processes of self-organization and solidarization, which were a reaction to the Belarusan authorities' COVID-dissidentness during the first

¹⁰ The Ministry of Economics initiates new measures to support business [online] <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/minekonomiki-initsiiruet-novye-mery-podderzhki-biznesa-415744-2020/> [access: 27.12.2021]

¹¹ The most important achievements of scientists of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus//Academic Humanities: the most important results of 2019 – Minsk: Belarusan science, 2020. – p. 169–195.

¹² Koršunaŭ G.P. The condition of the information field in a digitalizing society. Berkovsky Readings – 2019. Book culture in the context of international contacts. Minsk: CNL NAS of Belarus; M: FGBUN NIC “Science” of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2019. – 630 p. – p. 205–211.

¹³ Subjectivization is a process, by means of which there appears a subject as one of predetermined possibilities of organizing self-consciousness (Foucault M. Intellectuals and power: Selected political articles, speeches, and interviews. – M: Praxis, 2002.)

wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under such conditions, society saw that the authorities kept themselves aloof from the problem; the Belarusian diaspora, civil society, IT specialists, business, and ordinary non-indifferent citizens created a united front and an information-communication and organization base in order to get self-organized and to mutually aid in the situation of this COVID threat. As a result, within society there was an opinion that the state demonstrated its insufficiency and did not decrease the danger of getting infected and that «during the first wave of the coronavirus, it was civic initiatives that helped medical workers cope with the shortage of equipment and PPE»¹⁴.

The sociologist T. Vadalazhskaya wrote, «Belarusian society received a very good experience in this regard: people did not count on someone to solve this or that question, but did everything independently»¹⁵.

The public mobilization during the first wave of the coronavirus smoothly flowed into the 2020 presidential election campaign. Such a concatenation of circumstances gave society, which had received the COVID experience of self-organization and solidarization, *a legitimate possibility to try to ontologize the ripening subjectness in political space*. The authorities attempted to repressively stop any variants of such collective subjectivization. However, the specificity of 2020 was in the fact that the repressions did not stop the social dynamics. Society answered the repressions with not only spontaneous street actions (as it had repeatedly happened before), but also with a lot of organization-communication projects: from variants of getting included in the legal electoral process (as a part of election committees or as independent observers) to models of counting votes, which were alternative to the official Central Electoral Commission (“Voice”, “National Poll”).

The authorities’ falsification of the election and unprecedented violence the during the post-election period was seen and experienced by Belarusian society in the on-line regime. The principled opposition of power and society appeared – it revealed conclusively, scaled, and made the *new social structure of Belarusian society – horizontal* – up and running at full capacity.

A distinctive feature of “horizontal sociality” is non-hierarchical and decentralized interaction of active and responsible actors who have overall objectives and

¹⁴ Communication of state bodies with the population in questions of the coronavirus was failed [online] <https://health.ej.by/avtoritetno/2021/02/18/kommunikatsiya-gosorganov-s-nasele-niem-v-voprosah-koronavirusa-byla.html> [access: 23.12.2021].

¹⁵ Tatiana Vadalazhskaya: We will stop assigning the state the solution of many questions [online] <https://eurobelarus.info/news/position/2020/08/04/tat-yana-vodalazhskaya-reshenie-mnogih-voprosov-my-perestanem.html> [access: 29.12.2021].

develop new praxeological models without participation of constant intermediaries. Its functional displays are people's comprehension of their force and identity, initiative self-organization and creation of effective structures of joint action that work near official institutions or instead of them.

Summing up this text, we would like to underline the following:

- The social changes that led to the Belarusian Revolution in 2020 were multilevel and had been developing throughout all the contemporary history of Belarus;
- The scalarizing vector of all the social changes that took place during the last decades was the formation of a split-level and multi-compound base for Belarusian society's subjectivization;
- As of today, the main unresolved question of society's development is the absence of a possibility to dovetail the already happened social changes with the rules of functioning of authoritarian political space.

The protest wave and public opinion in 2020–2021

Aksana Shelest

The basic long-term factor of the revolutionary wave of the year 2020 is the oppositely directed development of Belarusian society and the political regime; for at least the last 10 years, since the presidential election in 2010, society's desire for sociopolitical transformations had been growing. At the level of empirical sociological data, it can be seen in the increase of a share of the population supporting the change of the situation existing in the country as a whole (about 70% already by 2016), considerable decrease of the level of paternalism, changes of axiological orientations in favor of the values of development and independence¹. At the same time, the system of government and institutions did not conduce to, but hindered the development of the public initiative, private business, and innovative processes more and more. The state institutions happened to be incapable of transformations corresponding to the level and direction of the development of the most progressive part of Belarusian society.

The short-term triggers that played a significant role in the fact that these accumulated contradictions not only went to the political field, but also led to the most mass and long-term protests in the history of independent Belarus, were three basic processes:

- haggles about Belarus' sovereignty in 2019 (the game of «profound integration» with Russia) that created serious tensions in the business environment and innovative sectors of the economy focused, first of all, on the Western world and standards, for which Russia's absorption of Belarus meant essential changes of conditions of their activity;

¹ Sociology of protests in Belarus and international assistance. Policy Brief | June 2021 // <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Er-hcbhVvkVlvIlaZGivKICpy-CFLl8p/view> (<https://ak-belarus.org/eng>)

- the reaction of the state and society to the crisis caused by the pandemic COVID-19, when the administrative system (especially at top levels) happened to be incapable to answer adequately the challenges caused by the incidence of the epidemic in the country, while public subjects demonstrated the unprecedented earlier level of self-organization, mutual aid, and solidarity²;
- the unprecedented in Belarus' contemporary history level of violence and cruelty during the crackdown of the first protest actions on August 9th-12th, which became an additional motive to join the active street protests³.

The 2020 protest wave: scales and social composition

The active street protests are not the only one measurement of the deployment of the political crisis of the year 2020; however, their scale defined many of its characteristics. Right after the announcement of the preliminary results of the presidential election, in the evening on August 9th, the protest wave swept over the whole country; protest actions took place not only in Minsk, regional and district centers, but also in towns, settlements, and even villages. The first «Sunday march» on August 16th gathered, according to the most modest estimations, 300 thousand participants only in Minsk; after that – the mass actions happened every Sunday throughout more than four months, up to the end of the year. The active protest combined different formats: marches and rallies, solidarity chains, “courtyard” actions, street concerts, performances, lectures and theatrical readings, the struggle for semiotics space (flags, graffiti, murals, “renaming” of significant places in the city), strikes, drives for signatures, appeals to MPs, economic pressure, etc.

There are no absolutely authentic data on the exact “alignment of forces” in Belarusian society as a whole at that point in time (not as of today, either) because representative polls as a tool of measuring public opinion are inaccessible today. However, the data of different researches, including not public ones, allow us to estimate approximately the general support of the current regime before and after the election in 2020 in the corridor of 15–30%.

² Belarus in the situation of the epidemic COVID-19: the character of the state's and society's reaction to the problem// <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2020/12/20/belarus-v-situatsii-epidemii-covid-19-harakter-reaktsii-na.html>

³ “The voice of the street”: sociological observations// <https://fly-uni.org/prastora/golos-ulicy-sociologicheskie-nabljudeniya/>; The portrait of the protesters: what German sociologists learned about Belarusians// <https://www.dw.com/ru/portret-protestujushhih-cto-nemeckie-sociolog-uznali-o-belorusah/a-57065186>

According to various polls, in summer-autumn 2020, from 14% to 29% of Belarusians, living in cities (i.e. from 700 thousand to 1,5 million people out of five million Belarusians who were covered by these researches) took part in different forms of the protests⁴.

The active part of the Belarusian protest consisted of different groups of people as for the criterion of their political experience.

The first, the most mass and diverse as for its characteristics, group is the people who joined the election campaign in the spring – the beginning of the summer of 2020. Generally, these are the people who used to avoid any participation in politics or who saw no sense in such participation. The attempts of the Belarusian regime to “neutralize” the potential leaders prior to the election led to the opposite result: essentially different strata united – the potential electorate of Babariko and Tsepkalo (the Belarusian “middle class”, innovative business, the sector of IT and creative industries) and the potential electorate of Tikhanovsky (the periphery, inhabitants of towns and depressive regions, regional small business and private entrepreneurship).

The second group includes activists of the third sector, intellectual and cultural initiatives, society’s nationally-oriented part, representatives of the “traditional opposition”, i.e. the people with a bigger or smaller personal history of political participation, taking part in these or those forms in the struggle against the regime before 2020. In general, this group was skeptical at the pre-election stage; however, in the process of the obvious increase of political mobilization, it was grasped by the wave and actively joined the further protest movement.

At last, the third “circle” of active participants of the protest consisted of people who were shocked by the cynical «80%» announced by the declared by the Central Election Commission and by the violence and lawlessness during the crackdown of the protest actions on August 9th–12th.

One more characteristic of the 2020 protest wave is the variety of the participants’ socially-demographic structure. Representatives of all generations, all sectors, different professional communities and social strata joined the active fight against the regime. We shall say again that there are no exact representative data describing the «socially-demographic portrait» of those who supported the protests. However, by comparing the data of various researches, we can formulate the following characteristics of the protest movement:

⁴ The portrait of the protesters: what German sociologists learned about Belarusians// <https://www.dw.com/ru/portret-protestujushhih-cto-nemeckie-sociologi-uznali-o-belorusah/a-57065186>; polls of Chatham House, the first wave (September 2020).

- almost equal gender balance, insignificant prevalence of men;
- prevalence, but not domination of the age group of 20–45 y.o.; inclusion of all generations;
- prevalence, but not absolute domination of the private sector and new forms of employment (freelance, self-employed, etc.) over the state-run sector (which representatives are about a third of participants of active forms of the protests);
- almost equal division of activity between Minsk and regions (about 50% of activity was in the capital);
- prevalence of higher education⁵.

2021: is it possible to return loyalty by means of force?

The year 2021 became the time of the counterrevolution; the Belarusian regime managed to preserve its control over the basic administrative and power structures and partially restored its control over the situation as a whole. The protest left «the streets», ceased to be fixed organoleptically, but does it mean that society's loyalty is restored and that the political crisis is over?

One of the signs of the opposite is the level of the political repressions that do not stop, but on the contrary – receive new forms more and more. In 2021, from the direct persecution of the political leaders and activists of the protest movement, the Belarusian regime passed to the institutional repressions: liquidations of various formats of the organization of public activity per se (political parties, initiatives, civil society organizations regardless of their field of activity, etc.), to the expansion of the employment ban practices (pressure and dismissals for the disloyal behavior or opinions of workers of state-run enterprises and organizations), to the legislation stiffening, the practical destruction of the institution of legal profession, etc. The attempts to demonstrate the returning of “the people's support” («dialogue platforms» under the patronage of Voskresensky, the carrying-out of the All-National Assembly, the declared constitutional reform) were flimsy and, as a result, failed; in 2021 the regime did not manage to formulate any positive offer that would be accepted by Belarusian society. Therefore, the basic tool of preserving its control was the force and fear.

It is confirmed by the data of sociological polls accessible to analysis. We shall say that today there is no complete picture of the situation and public moods in the

⁵ Oksana Shelest. Revolution in Belarus – Faktoren und Werteorientierungen // <https://www.laender-analysen.de/belarus-analysen/53/revolution-in-belarus-faktoren-und-werteorientierungen/>

country; the carrying-out of representative researches is extremely complicated. As of today, the majority of polls in Belarus, which lay claim to be representative and which results are opened for the public, are telephone or Internet polls that are carried out by European or relocated Belarusian research centers. In this section, we shall lean on a series of Internet polls organized with the support of Chatham House. They have their restrictions: they only cover the urban population and, besides, have an additional bias in sampling because they are carried out with the use of the Internet (the Internet usage level in Belarus allows us to assume that this bias is not crucial). Still, this project has a serious advantage: it is conducted in a monitoring mode (the unity of the sample building technique, the technique of carrying out polls, and the basic set of questions are preserved), which allows us to estimate confidently enough the dynamics of changes of public opinion and moods as for a number of characteristics.

There are several important aspects⁶

The Belarusians' level of trust and social health in 2021. The public-political mobilization in 2020 developed against the backdrop of a noticeable fall of the level of trust in the state structures and institutions. It happened because of the reaction of the state bodies to the situation with the COVID-19 epidemic, the unvarnished suppression of the real scales of the death rate and other problems connected with this crisis⁷.

The Chatham House polls data show that within 2021 the level of trust in the basic state institutions remained low and fluctuated basically within the sample error. By November 2021, the indicator of trust in the president grew a little, but still – it is not beyond the corridor of 30–35%.

⁶ The data from the Chatham House research reports, 1–6 waves.

⁷ The level of Minsk's trust in the Central Election Committee, according to official sociologists, is within the limits of 11%// <https://sputnik.by/20200619/Sotsiologi-nazvali-uroven-doveriya-k-Lukashenko-i-TsIK-1044969195.html>; Sociologist Andrei Vardomatsky on how the coronavirus changes Belarus// <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/razzhizhenie-tsementa-sotsiolog-andrej-var-domat-skij-o-tom-kak-koronavirus-menyaet-belarus/>; Belarus in the situation of the COVID-19 epidemic: the character of the state's and society's reaction to the problem// <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/ru/library/publication/2020/12/20/belarus-v-situatsii-epidemii-covid-19-harakter-reaktsii-na.html>

How much do you trust these or those organizations or institutions?(The share of those who answered "I trust", %)	January 2021	April 2021	July 2021	November 2021
President	27	26	27	32
Council of Ministers (Government)	21	21	24	26
Central Election Committee	16	14	16	16
Local authorities	21	17	21	22
Judicial bodies	21	18	23	24
State security bodies	26	24	26	27
Police	28	22	25	25

The level of trust in the Central Election Committee, judicial and power bodies remains catastrophically low.

Simultaneously, the level of trust in the alternative political "staffs" during this period decreases (the most popular in the beginning of the year subjects "lost" approximately 10%). In the deeper analysis and interpretation of the data on the answers to "sensitive" political questions, it is also necessary to consider «the fear factor» (which, by calculations of researchers, can bring distortions of up to 8%); however, even without considering these distortions, the level of trust in the oppositional structures in exile throughout 2021 remained practically at the same level as the level of trust in the basic state institutions.

How much do you trust these or those organizations or institutions?(The share of those who answered "I trust", %)	January 2021	April 2021	July 2021	November 2021
Babariko's Staff/Party "Together"	38	36	33	29
Tikhanovskaya's Office	34	30	29	25
Coordination Council	34	30	30	24
National Anti-crisis Department [NAU]	19	20	22	21

Public moods are reflected vividly enough in the level of trust in the state-run and non-state institutions from one sphere. Thus, the trust in the independent mass media and independent trade unions exceeds the level of trust in the state-run mass media and trade unions in 2 times (even considering the fact that for many long years the independent trade unions in Belarus had not been numerous and had not played any significant role).

How much do you trust these or those organizations or institutions?(The share of those who answered "I trust", %)	January 2021	April 2021	July 2021	November 2021
State-run mass media	17	15	18	19
Non-state mass media	46	40	37	41
State-run trade unions	17	15	18	19
Non-state trade unions	36	33	34	36

One more important indicator characterizing the general assessment of the situation in the country is the social and economic health of the population. Judging by the poll data, moods in society remain quite disturbing: about 50% of the pollees do not feel safe in their own country; the expectations of the approach of a fast economic crisis decreased a little bit in summer 2021, but still remain rather high. Citizens' economic health does not improve – the share of those who mark the improvement of their own financial position remains stably low.

How much do you agree with the following statements?(%)	April 2021		July 2021		November 2021	
	Completely or more likely I agree	Completely or more likely I do not agree	Completely or more likely I agree	Completely or more likely I do not agree	Completely or more likely I agree	Completely or more likely I do not agree
I feel safe in Belarus	32	52	39	43	35	48
Belarus will be faced with a serious economic crisis soon	64	10	55	8	55	11
For the last two months, my family's financial position has improved	17	68	17	64	15	70

The ratio of supporters and opponents of changes, the dynamics of the attitude towards the protests in 2020.

The authors of the research carried out by the Chatham House, on the basis of a complex of characteristics, define three groups that can conditionally be called the «protest kernel», «Lukashenko's bastion», and «neuters». The first two groups include people who more or less consistently adhere to one of the parties of the

political opposition developed in 2020; the group «neuters» includes those who have no opinion on political questions or answer inconsistently.

The analysis of the dynamics of the number of these groups demonstrates that for a year, from November 2020 to November 2021, the “alignment of forces” has changed insignificantly – the share of the group of supporters of changes, who support the political protest, has decreased a little bit; the group of consistent supporters of the Belarusian regime has not increased; and these two poles are almost equivalent as for its number.

Groups (% out of the total number of the pollees)	November 2020	April 2021	July 2021	November 2021
«Protest kernel»	38	34	36	30
«Neuters»	34	41	36	43
«Lukashenko's bastion»	28	25	28	27

Within 2021, the support of the actions protesting against the authorities decreased a little bit; however, about a third of the pollees are still ready to express such support.

What is your attitude towards the actions of protest against the current authorities? (%)	January 2021	April 2021	July 2021	November 2021
Unequivocally or more likely positive	39	36	37	33
I find it difficult to answer	21	25	24	25
Unequivocally or more likely negative	40	39	39	42

What is your attitude towards the following demands of protesters, do you support them or do you not share them? (The share of those who answered "I do", %)	April 2021	July 2021	November 2021
The carrying-out of a new fair election	64	65	69
The carrying-out of a fair investigation of the facts of violence on the part of siloviki [all troops 72 and officers of all law enforcement agencies]		70	68
Release of all political prisoners	64	61	59
Siloviki must stop savaging protesters	64	61	60

Within the year, the support of the basic requirements voiced in 2020 by the protest movement did not practically change; more than two thirds of the pollees are still ready to support the carrying-out of a new fair election; another most widely supported demand is to carry out a fair investigation of the facts of violence committed by the power structures. More than a half of the pollees support the requirement to free political prisoners and to stop further repressions and pressure upon those who disagree with the regime.

It is possible to constate that in 2021 the revolutionary effervescency of the summer-autumn of 2020 was replaced by deaf opposition. Leaning on the apparatus of power and administrative pressure, the Belarusan regime did manage to return its control over the situation and to suppress the open forms of protest; however, public moods did not change essentially. By 2022, Belarusan society was in the condition of a full legal default, a prolonged political crisis, and the absence of any positive proposal of how to solve it by neither Belarusan regime, nor political subjects generated on the wave of the political mobilization in 2020.

Belarusans abroad in 2020-2021: the awakening of the Diaspora and its role in the Belarusian protest movement

Maryla Hilica

I. Activity prior to 2020

Until 2020, at the international level, the Belarusian Diaspora was represented by the large international organization – the International Public Society “Belarusans’ World Association «Бацькаўшчына»” («Homeland»)¹ – that worked since 1990 and united the organizations of the Belarusians abroad from more than 20 countries of the world, and by the Government of the Belarusian People’s Republic in exile (since 1919), which mission is to represent the interests of independent and democratic Belarus in the world².

There are also the oldest organizations of the Belarusian Diaspora: the Association of the Belarusians in Great Britain (since 1946), the Belarusian-American Association (since 1949), and the Association of the Belarusians in Canada (since 1948).

Also, there is a number of quite visible associations of the Belarusian Diasporas in various countries, e.g.: the organization “Belarusans of Sweden”, the Solidarity Movement “Together” registered in Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, and the Czech Republic, the Belarusian Diaspora of Switzerland, etc.

It is necessary to mention that prior to 2020 in many countries of Europe and the world the Belarusians had not united in sustainable communities, had not registered as legal bodies, and had not conducted any intensive coordinated work. Their activity was rather aimed at their “internal” matters: the solution of everyday problems, the organization of meetings, acquaintances and socialization,

¹ International Public Society “Belarusans’ World Association «Бацькаўшчына»” («Homeland»). – 23.04.2022: <https://zbsb.org>.

² Council of the Belarusian People’s Republic. – 23.04.2020: <https://www.radabnr.org>.

– not at the “external” matters that have to do with Belarus, its problems and questions, contacts and cooperation with the public in the country.

The Belarusian Diaspora communities that were united in organizations frequently had a small amount of members and the basic direction of their work was basically connected with the topic of Belarusian culture, history, languages, and attempts to influence the Belarusian agenda in the world, to raise the problems with democracy in Belarus through appeals to state institutions, pickets and actions.

II. Activity in 2020: pre-election time

In the beginning of 2020, a certain part of the Belarusian Diasporas joined the help rendered to the Belarusians through fundraisings and dissemination of the information on these or those events on their web-sites and pages in social networks.

It is necessary to remember the considerable financial help during the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Belarusian society “started to rescue itself independently” because of the insufficient and inadequate policy of the current authorities. According to the data from open sources, 20% (or 40,000 dollars) of the total sum of the money collected during the first month of the activity of the most well-known campaign aimed at helping doctors in Belarus “ByCovid19” was donations of the Belarusians abroad³. Except money, the Belarusian Diasporas also helped to deliver important medical tools.

Earlier, the Belarusians abroad rendered their aid to those who were repressed after the rallies against the “deepened integration” with Russia, which took place in December 2019.

The election campaign events in Belarus in 2020 changed not only Belarusian society in the country, but also the Belarusian Diaspora. Basically, the Belarusian Diasporas’ activity during the election period was carried out in the following directions:

1. Actions, meetings, “solidarity chains”. Solidarity actions organized by communities of the Belarusians abroad took place in various countries of Europe, America, and the world; the number of participants of these actions was rather large, which frequently was a surprise for the organizers and leaders of communities of the Diasporas. To take part in such actions and pickets, Belarusians used to

³ Belarusians abroad help their Homeland struggle against the coronavirus// “Polskie Radio”. – 25.04.2022: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/396/7819/Artykul/2500014>.

come from other cities and regions. Basically, the actions were started in June, when the two presidential candidates Sergei Tikhanovsky and Victor Babariko had already been detained.

2. Nomination of observers during the election, the carrying-out of exit polls, and participation in the voting. Supporting the election movement in Belarus and the initiatives launched in the country, which were aimed at carrying out the fair election (“Fair People”, the platform “Voice”), the Belarusian Diasporas’ purpose was to prevent falsifications of the voting results in voting precincts in their countries. Activists disseminated among the Diaspora the information on the course of the election campaign and the legal information on how to vote correctly abroad, organized groups of observers during the election and volunteers to carry out exit polls (which were carried out in 19 countries at least) and actively published their results. In many voting precincts, observers marked infringements and in this connection they sent complaints to election committees.

III. Activity after August 2020

The current authorities’ unprecedented repressions forced people to leave Belarus since the very beginning of the political crisis. Many people fled the country because of the threat of persecutions and arrests since summer 2020; in 2021 they were joined by those who got under the process of mass lay-offs and expulsions from universities on political grounds, the liquidation of NGOs and independent mass media. Although, under these conditions, it is impossible to precisely count the number of Belarusians who went abroad because of the repressions, various sources say it is from several tens to several hundreds of thousands of people. Most often, Belarusians moved to Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, Latvia, and other countries of Europe and the world. A considerable part of these people consider themselves not emigrants, but relocatees or refugees, and hope to return to Belarus in short-term or intermediate term prospects if the situation is changed. These people often actively join the Diaspora’s initiatives or initiate their own ones.

It is necessary to separately say that it is in emigration that there work structures of Belarusian society’s political leaders: Svetlana Tikhanovskaya’s Staff, the Coordination Council, and the National Anti-crisis Department. Their activity covers a big spectrum of directions and tasks⁴. A number of projects and initiatives

⁴ The activity of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya’s Staff has the main objective – to carry out the new, democratic presidential election in Belarus; it is aimed at representing the interests of Belarusian society that supports democratic changes, at the international scene, at creating political and

presuppose close cooperation with the Belarusian Diaspora and the initiatives organized by the Belarusians who were compelled to leave the country in 2020-2021.

Within the framework of this article, it is impossible to provide a complete description of the activities of the Belarusians abroad since August 2020 because they are large-scale and variegated. We shall try to present a small review according to the types and characters of the basic directions of this activity.

Financial help to victims of the repressions

The Belarusians abroad actively rendered their monetary help to Belarusian victims through the already working and created again foundations: the foundation “BySol”, the initiative “BY_help”⁵, the platform “NAMES”⁶, etc.

The foundation “BySol” is one of the most well-known and largest initiatives that collected money for the victims of the repressions after the post-election events in Belarus. It was created in August 2020 in Kyiv where its founders – the human rights defender and activist Andreï Stryżak and Jarasłaŭ Lichačeŭski – had moved due to the political pressure. The foundation concentrated on financial help to people who lost their jobs for political reasons and who were compelled to leave Belarus.

Also, there were separate foundations, partners of “BySol”, for certain target groups: journalists and media (“Media Solidarity”), medical employees (“Foun-

economic (sanctions) pressure upon the current authorities of Belarus, at supporting the strike movements, at helping victims of the political repressions, etc. The Coordination Council is the only one representative body of Belarusian society created in August 2020 for the purpose of organizing the process of transferring power and to provide concord in society, to protect the sovereignty and independence of Belarus. The tasks of the National Anti-crisis Department have to do with the liquidation of the reasons of the political crisis in Belarus (including the work aimed at the non-recognition of today’s authorities at the international level, bringing criminals to responsibility within the framework of universal jurisdiction, preparation of the international tribunal, economic pressure upon the current authorities, support and mobilization of the Belarusians who support democratic changes) and the preparation of power institutions for a transition period.

The web-site information “Svetlana Tikhanovskaya”. – 4/28/2022: <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/be>. The web-site information “Coordination Council”. – 4/28/2022: <https://rada.vision/by>. The web-site information “National Anti-crisis Department”. – 4/28/2022: <https://belarus-nau.org>.

⁵ The initiative was created in Belarus in 2017 to help the victims of repressions, who were participants of the protests against the so-called “Decree on social parasitism”. In 2020-2021, the initiative helped the victims of the post-election protests in Belarus.

⁶ Center of Medical Aid to the victims of the peaceful rallies//“NAMES”. – 25.04.2022: <https://imenamag.by/projects/help-for-injured>.

dation of Medical Solidarity”), sportsmen (“Foundation of Sports Solidarity”), and many other less scale initiatives.

Sometimes, the Diasporas built personal contacts and got acquainted personally with this or that person, suffered family, or a community/initiative and rendered them financial support directly.

Financial help was spent on lawyer services, payment of penalties, medical treatment, surgeries, rehabilitation, psychological help to victims, relocation from Belarus, accommodations, food, and other household needs for refugees, support to families who lost their sources of income due to political repressions, etc.

Help to strikers

After Svetlana Tikhonovskaya announced the national strike in October 2020, the Belarusian Diasporas began to help actively workers who joined the strike. Thus, the Belarusians of Germany launched the action #YouStrikeWeWork – they sent their daily earnings to help the strikers. Soon, the action was joined by the Belarusian Diasporas in other countries. It was informed that only through the foundation BySol the action #YouStrikeWeWork during several days collected about half a million euros⁷.

There are examples when the large and financially affluent Diasporas sponsored the workers of a concrete enterprise. For example, the Belarusians of Seattle helped the strikers of the oil refinery “Naftan”, and the Diaspora of New York helped the largest in the country strike committee at “Belaruskaliy”.

Help to political prisoners

Political prisoners and their families were helped by the Belarusians abroad, first of all, through foundations and whip-rounds. Another important direction was a wide spread of the information on actions, pickets, exhibitions, and public events, publications in social networks and on the web-sites of the Diasporas’ organizations, interviews and communication with the local mass media, local and international human rights defending organizations, appeals to local political elites. The Belarusians abroad (and, sometimes, other non-indifferent citizens of

⁷ “You strike, we work”. The way the Belarusians abroad help the strikers// “DW”. – 25.04.2022: <https://www.dw.com/ru/vy-bastuete-my-otrabotaem-kak-belorusy-zarubezhja-pomogajut-bastujushhim/a-55432365>.

foreign countries as well) actively joined the initiative “Write a letter to a political prisoner”.

Help to fugitives

Lines of activity of many communities and initiatives had to do with help to refugees fleeing from Belarus. The relevancy and topicality of this type of aid increased with the strengthening of the repressions in Belarus and with the departure of more and more people. Quite often did people escape, being unprepared in the financial, informational, and moral plan.

The Belarusian Diasporas organized for fugitives lodging⁸, food and clothes, psychological help, legal consultations on the questions of legalization in the country, help in the reception of financial support from this or those foundations of solidarity, support in the search for a job and accommodations, in the reception of education, actions aimed at socialization, cultural events, etc.

This help was rendered by the organizations that already existed (e.g. the Belarusian House in Warsaw) and by a considerable number of initiatives and foundations that appeared after the events of August 2020: the Belarusian Solidarity Center, the foundation “Belarusans in Łódź, the Community of Belarusans in Wrocław – in Poland; the Free Belarus Center, the anti-crisis center “Belarusian House”, “Native Land”, the Belarusian anti-crisis center in Lviv – in Ukraine, and others. The Belarusian Diasporas in Canada, the USA, Germany, etc. actively financially supported the functioning of the centers that helped Belarusians in the countries where they fled to most of all.

The political repressions compelled not only separate Belarusians, but also the whole organizations of civil society, editions of the independent mass media, and businesses to leave the country. In order to successfully relocate the latter, the Association of Belarusian Business Abroad (ABBA) was created. Here, it is possible to recall the project “By_Mapka” from the Belarusian Solidarity Center (an interactive map of Belarusian businesses outside of Belarus, created for the sake of its support) and the initiative to help the repressed businesses “For Business”. Also, there appeared different open spaces and hubs: for Belarusian journalists (e.g. media hubs in Białystok and Warsaw), for activists and public organizations (the Warsaw-based Belarusian Youth Hub that also helps Belarusian

⁸ One of the examples is the temporary shelter for Belarusian refugees in Białystok organized thanks to the means of the Belarusian Diaspora in Canada and the USA and Svetlana Tikhonovskaya's foundation.

students). It is necessary to mention the well-known hub “Imaguru” that – after it was compelled to close and relocate – continued to support Belarusian startups and launched the project “Solidarity Hubs”⁹.

Here, it is important to mention the activity of the Barys Zvozskaŭ Human Rights House in Vilnius, which became an integral infrastructural part of the human rights defending work during this crisis period; it carries out a number of important functions in the direction of supporting and helping various groups of victims suffered from the repressions and in the direction of monitoring and advocating the implementation of human rights.

Advancement of the belarusan agenda

The Belarusian Diasporas considered one of their important tasks to influence public opinion, political elites of their countries and international institutions, to draw attention to the political crisis in Belarus. They built communication with the local mass media, built personal contacts, offered their materials, press releases, and spread the information through pickets and actions, as well as cultural events.

It is necessary to underline the example of the community “Belarusans of Sweden” that in August 2020 – for the purpose of distributing the correct information on the situation in Belarus – organized special working groups that created thematic materials, built communication with politicians, public organizations, and the Swedish mass media, and revealed actual errors in the materials of the latter when they covered the events in Belarus, and wrote official appeals¹⁰.

The Belarusians abroad responded to and joined the actions proposed by oppositional political leaders. E.g. the International Day of Solidarity with Belarus, initiated by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, which took place on February, 7th, 2021, and which was joined, inter alia, by heads and officials of foreign states, as well as the Week of Belarusian Culture – on July, 5th-11th, 2021. These and other events spurred the uniting of the Belarusians in the world, their solidarity with the compatriots in Belarus, and influenced the media agenda.

⁹ Imaguru web-site page: Solidarity Residence. – 28.04.2022: <https://imaguru.lt/solidarity-hub>.

¹⁰ Facebook page of the “Belarusans in Sweden / Belarusier i Sverige”. – 25.04.2022: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/sverigesbelarusier/posts/10157818473807730>

Advocacy and lobbying

The Belarusian Diaspora was one of the forces, which – together with the political “staffs” – made the USA accept the Act on democracy, human rights, and the sovereignty of Belarus¹¹. Many of those who had not been interested in politics began to lobby questions of democratic changes in Belarus with the help of petitions, and appeals to congressmen¹².

Thanks to the efforts of the Diaspora in Canada, a group of friends of Belarus was created in the Canadian Parliament. The Diaspora sees its role in the fact that the country accepted sanctions against the regime in Belarus. Also, the Belarusians of Canada try to make the authorities consider a possibility of accepting a program aimed at receiving refugees from Belarus¹³.

Thanks to the initiative of the Belarusian Diaspora in the Czech Republic and its cooperation with the Czech government¹⁴, people who suffered during the protests received medical aid within the framework of the Czech governmental program Medevac.

The image of the current authorities of Belarus was destroyed after the World Hockey Championship 2021 in Minsk was cancelled¹⁵. The Belarusians abroad also participated in this campaign. Thus, the Association of the Belarusians in Switzerland “RAZAM.CH” picketed the IIHF headquarters in Zurich. The Belarusians in the Czech Republic and Germany picketed the offices of the general sponsors of the Championship – the companies “Škoda” and “Nivea”. These brands (as well as “Tissot” and “Liqui Moly”), as a result, refused to sponsor the Championship if it is carried out in Belarus, and a few days later the IIHF made a decision to cancel the carrying-out of the WHC-2021 in Belarus.

The Belarusian Diasporas also joined the movement of economic pressure upon the companies that work with state-run enterprises in Belarus. Representatives of

¹¹ The Act d/d December, 21st, 2020 recognizes the Coordination Council a lawful institution aimed at a dialogue on the peaceful transfer of power and does not recognize the current head of Belarus as lawfully elected.

¹² New York supports Belaruskalyi and San Francisco – Žabinka. The way the Belarusians of America help their fellow countrymen in Belarus// “Radio Liberty”. – 22.04.2022: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31306440.html>

¹³ Canada is known for its policy of accepting fugitives from dangerous countries and regions.

¹⁴ The way the Belarusians tortured by siloviki [law enforcement officers] were evacuated. Kryścina Šyjanok about the unique program of help// “Radio Liberty”. – 22.04.2022: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31614406.html>

¹⁵ World Hockey Championship 2021 // “Wikipedia”. – 26.04.2022: https://be.wikipedia.org/wiki/Чэмпіянат_свегу_па_хакеі_з_шайбай_2021

the Diaspora actively wrote letters to these companies, organized meetings near shops and embassies of the countries of these brands¹⁶.

Among the initiatives that appeared in 2020, it is possible to mention the community “Belarusans Abroad”, an association of Belarusians who constantly or temporarily live outside of Belarus. The community consolidates the work of Belarusian Diasporas in the world; among its appreciable projects is the carrying-out of the World Congress of the Belarusians, which led to the creation of “National Embassies of Belarus” (meant to become alternative to the official embassies; their purpose is to inform the public on the situation in Belarus, to help refugees and relocatees, to protect the interests of Belarus in international organizations and political bodies, etc.).

It is important to mention the lobbying of the questions that have to do with Belarusian refugees and their legalization on the territory of foreign countries. The number of Belarusians who left the native land because of the repressions and the political crisis did increase and this problem became acute. This issue was raised by political oppositional leaders and the Belarusian Diasporas. Here, it is possible to mention the example of the initiative of the “Free Belarus Center”, as a result of which the term of the legal presence of Belarusians in Ukraine was prolonged to 180 days per year¹⁷.

Participation in actions, meetings, recording appeals and videos

The Belarusian Diasporas’ uncountable actions of solidarity in tens of countries of the world became strong support to the protesting society in Belarus¹⁸. Speaking poetically, the year 2020 not only acquainted Belarusians with each other, but also acquainted the world with the Belarusians.

During the actions and meetings, the Belarusians abroad got acquainted and united, and then started new initiatives and organizations.

Actions passed under the common slogans for democratic changes in Belarus, for the termination of violence and freeing of political prisoners, and also they were

¹⁶ E.g. the Swedish insurance company EKN refused two projects in Belarus. At the same time, numerous actions and pickets near IKEA had no success: in 2021 the company continued its cooperation with Belarus.

¹⁷ Facebook page “Free Belarus Center”. – 25.04.2022: <https://www.facebook.com/FreeBelarusCenter/posts/214418517062461>

¹⁸ Canada, the USA, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, the UK, the Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Estonia, Denmark, Israel, Italy, Georgia, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Turkey, Cyprus, etc.

often dedicated to a certain theme: support to the national strike, to the memory of Raman Bandarenka, support to doctor Arciom Sarokin, celebration of traditional and national holidays (Freedom Day on March 25th, the holiday Dziady ["Grandparents"]), the carrying-out of memory days ("Night of killed poets" on October 29th, the anniversary of the Chernobyl tragedy on April 26th). News from Belarus about new repressions became occasions of solidarity actions (actions to support the liquidated non-state organizations and mass media, repressed Belarusian journalists, political prisoners with unprecedented sentences, etc.). Such a reaction of the Diasporas to topical events in Belarus demonstrates certain adjusted communication and again attests to the changes in the position of a considerable part of the Belarusians abroad: from the political apathy and disinterest in how Belarus lives to the active participation in the Belarusian agenda and in the general movement for democratic changes in the country.

It is necessary to separately mention rather a strong Belarusian cultural movement abroad, which developed as a result of the Belarusian events in 2020-2021. The political pressure and repressions touched very many Belarusian cultural figures and organizations; their considerable part was compelled to leave the country. Many of them did not stop their activity and continued it abroad. They started a considerable work aimed at helping and supporting Belarusian culture, at its preservation and development under the conditions of the political crisis, and at advancing it in the world. During this period, there appeared a number of vivid and important initiatives, including the ones that became the symbols of the protest movement – the "Free Chorus" and the independent theatrical group "Kupałaŭcy". Among the most visible and active centers, it is necessary to mention the Belarusian Council of Culture (the former Foundation of Cultural Solidarity, 2021)¹⁹, the Belarusian PEN²⁰, the Belarusian Youth Hub in Warsaw.

To be continued

Belarusian society's effervescency in August 2020 united and strengthened the Belarusian Diaspora in the world. Many communities, organizations, and initiatives of the Belarusians abroad appeared as a result of a reaction to the events in their native land. People got acquainted during actions and pickets, united in communities in order to help fellow countrymen, consolidated to effectively solve tasks in view.

¹⁹ The web-site information "Belarusian Council of Culture". – 28.04.2022: <https://byculture.org>

²⁰ The web-site information "Belarusian PEN". – 28.04.2022: <https://penbelarus.org>

The Belarusians abroad voice the idea of creating in the future an effective global community of the Belarusian Diasporas. We want to hope very much that the Belarusian movement that appeared in 2020 on a global scale will not disappear or fade away, but will lead to quality changes and interesting worthy transformations for the benefit of Belarus and the world.

Art as one of motivators and drivers of the protests in Belarus in 2020

Miron Lidski

Music, symbols, and visual word pictures have always been important parts of public-political events in Belarus. It can be seen during all political events of the last decades. It was strongly felt during the celebrating of the 100th and 101st anniversaries of the Belarusian People's Republic [1918] when the cultural content consolidated and mobilized people to participate in actions/events considerably more than the open political protest. However, the peak role of creativity, art, and various art formats was revealed during the events of 2020.

We shall try to collect and analyze the most interesting and influential creative phenomena in the Belarusian protest from May to the end of 2020.

The first who began to actively use art forms in his political activity in May, while organizing signatures collection pickets for Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, was Sergei Tikhanovsky.

Prior to his arrest, Tikhanovsky managed to think up and promote the recognizable corporate style "Country For Life", the slogan "Stop Tarakan [the Cockroach]! No Pasaran!"¹, the visual image of a pantoufle that squashes a cockroach. All these forms went viral very soon, and there appeared people's creativity in the form of memes, songs, and performances.

On May, 25th, during a stream in the city of Słucak, Sergei Tikhanovsky said that in his studio he had recorded the song "Mury" ["Walls"] in Russian and Belarusian and also urged people to learn its words and to sing together in Belarusian squares during pre-election pickets, actions of solidarity, and political rallies.

By the way, the Belarusian version of "Mury" was sung for the first time by the writer Andrei Chadanovič in the frosty "Plošča-2010" [protests in the Square in

¹ <https://youtu.be/E6OsqgxQtqs>

Minsk in 2010]². He translated from the Polish language the lyrics of the song “Mury” that used to be the informal anthem of the Polish “Solidarity”. It was written in 1978 and sung by the Polish musician Jacek Kaczmarski. In his turn, Jacek Kaczmarski was inspired by the song “L’Estaca” by the Catalan singer Lluís Llach, written in 1968. It was an anthem of the fight against Franco’s dictatorship in Catalonia.

At first, during actions/events, the Russian-language version of the song (“Let’s destroy this prison”) performed by the Russian group “Arkadiy Kots” was played more often. Gradually, the Belarusian-language variant of the song “Mury” became more popular, and during Svetlana Tikhonovskaya’s rallies the full version of this song in Belarusian was played: Andrei Chadanovich changed the last stanzas in his translation to reflect concrete events in Belarus.

It is impossible to count the total of millions of viewing and listening of this song as on Youtube only it is possible to find hundreds of variants of videos with a large number of viewings. The song “Mury” is still very popular after the election; there appear new versions with the interesting sound and performance.

The “Volny Chor” [“Free Chorus”] that performs “Mury” in the streets, in shopping centers, and at concerts became a phenomenon in Belarusian culture³. The song became a part of actions of solidarity with Belarus in various countries of the world. Memorable was the performance of “Mury” at the concert in Warsaw “Solidarni z Białorusią 2020”⁴; 500,000 views belongs to the video “Poles With Belarusians” where the song is executed by Nasta Niakrasava and Jacek Klejff. Ksienija Żuk from the NaviBand group and Igor Herbut emotionally performed the song in Warsaw with a symphony orchestra and the Harmoni chorus at the concert “Playing For Belarus”.

It is possible to say that the song “Mury” will stay forever one of the most indicative songs in the history of new Belarus because it accompanied the most mass in Belarus rallies, protests, and solidarity actions: when people performed it in public places they were detained and arrested for days⁵.

“Mury” was not the only song that was performed during the elections and protests in Belarus. The 2020 events became a catalyst of appearing new creative

² “Mury” performed by Andrei Chadanovich: <https://youtu.be/Ul0xQDqmGzk> and by Żmicer Vaiciuskievič: <https://youtu.be/fMKEITqEBJI>

³ <https://youtu.be/QlV3b1xqaQQ>

⁴ <https://youtu.be/SzcjIkOUljo>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_I fzQuo0l4

phenomena, e.g. the “Free Chorus”⁶, the “Free Orchestra”, the community drummers “Break Away!”⁷, the association of the fired actors and employees of the Janka Kupala Theater⁸, a source of inspiration for musicians and groups in absolutely different genres, and a time to reconsider the musical heritage and traditions of Belarusian culture and history in new creative projects.

The most complete playlist with the Belarusian protest songs that appeared in 2020–2021 was compiled by the journalist of “Radio Liberty” Alaksandr Arsionau. In May 2021, the playlist⁹ totaled to already 600 songs and videoclips by hundreds of young and well-known performers and collectives, mainly from Belarus.

In his interview to the portal Onliner¹⁰, having listened to the compositions from this selection, the influential Russian musical critic and journalist Artemiy Troitsky said, “It is not just productive, it is hyper-productive. It is just phenomenal! I have never seen anything like this in my life. I have a series of lectures, “Hundred years of musical censorship in Russia”, for which I made a playlist from Vertinsky to Noize MC and Pornofilmy. And for a hundred years there are about 60 full-fledged protest songs, while in Belarus, for several months, there are more than 200. I do not just know: probably, nothing like that can be found in the world song history. The slogan popular right now in Belarus is “You’re incredible!” and in this case it corresponds to the truth one hundred percent. Such an explosion of talented, passionate, protest music for such a short period of time... I think it is a world record. It did surprise me a lot!”

One more interesting tendency is the incipience of not only separate creative projects, collaborations, or concrete products, but whole associations, unions, and cultural foundations.

The first such association #культпротест [cultural protest]¹¹ declared about itself on July, 1st, 2020: “We, workers in the sphere of culture, declare #культпротест. We protest against the fact that in the streets of our cities unknown persons abduct and beat our fellow citizens with the inactivity or even assistance of the bodies meant to protect us. We protest against the arrests of the presidential candidates on ridiculous pretexts. Our #культпротест is against the total lawless-

⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/volnychoir/>

⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/platform.by/>

⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/kupalaucy/>

⁹ <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJ88h9ZcroOjLicn9Ipm4yRaVxuoif4Wk>

¹⁰ <https://people.onliner.by/2020/11/01/artemij-troickij>

¹¹ <https://moc.media/ru/3086>

ness when the arrested persons are not allowed to meet with their lawyers and are being tortured.”

In their statement, the authors of the initiative declared that they would use the hashtag #культпротест to mark what they do and publish – the things they can do best of all: to create art.

In July 2020, Belarusian actors, musicians, and directors recorded joint video appeals¹², which main requirement was to free political prisoners.

One of the strongest Cultural Protest products was the song “To You” by the groups “Naka”¹³, “Dzieciuki”, “Petlya Pristrastia”, “RSP”, and “Rostany”, on a poem by Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, which became a reaction to the political events in Belarus in July 2020. In total, the video of this song collected several million views on different platforms.

In September 2020, the writer Andreï Chadanovič wrote about the Cultural Protest in his article¹⁴ for Culture.pl, “Until recently, Belarusian art workers were not predisposed to open recusancy. Now, after the brutal repressions against civilians during the first days after the election, discontent boils over. It became clear that Belarusian culture would not be the same. A lot of official laureates started to refuse their awards, ranks, diplomas, and grants. Some journalists of the state-run television and other state-run mass media quit their jobs. It is necessary to remember, for example, the employees of the House of Radio, who began to strike against the lies and violence.”

The Belarusian Foundation of Cultural Solidarity became one of the central associations that started to coordinate and support the repressed art workers and to create new cultural products after the events in August 2020¹⁵.

The Foundation began its work in October 2020 with the publication of an open letter of art and culture workers of Belarus against the violence and falsifications. More than 1,500 musicians, artists, actors, teachers, directors, writers, and other figures and activists – from both “official” and “informal” cultural circles – signed the open letter with the demand to reconsider the results of the presidential election, to stop the violence, to cancel “black lists”, and not to pressurize the masters of culture who disagree with the policy of the Belarusian authorities¹⁶.

¹² Video appeal 1: <https://youtu.be/4YpmlgMaaNU>; Video appeal 2: <https://youtu.be/ifOILRsr39Q>

¹³ <https://youtu.be/7ZU8XSCulsM>

¹⁴ <https://culture.pl/ru/article/belarus-kultprotest>

¹⁵ <https://byculture.org/>

¹⁶ <https://tuzinfm.by/list/>

One more strong factor that influenced the protests, consolidated them, inspired people, and allowed them to make it more visible were various visual forms.

The first were memes that had to do with the slogans “Country For Life”, “Stop Tarakan! No pasaran!” and the classical slogan “Long Live Belarus!”. Then, there appeared the memes of “3%”, “97%”, and “Psychosis”, which were widely spread through posters, street art, Telegram stickers, design, souvenir and promo production.



One of the main symbols of the events of the summer 2020 were the united together three emojis ♥ □ ✊ (Heart, Fist, Victory) that meant the slogan “We believe! We can! We shall win!” or “We love! We can! We shall win!”.

This symbol appeared casually after the well-known joint photo of Maria Kolesnikova, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, and Veronika Tsepkalo, when these three declared about the uniting of the three staffs of Viktor Babariko, Valeriy Tsepkalo, and Svetlana Tikhanovskaya around one program and one candidate – Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.



Right after the joint statement, the photo of the three women becomes viral and gives rise to people's numerous creative works. One of them, created by Antanina Słabodčykava, becomes the central symbol of the whole political campaign.



Music was an important part of the election campaign of the united staff in July-August 2020. Thus, popular Belarusian musicians performed during rallies in regional and district cities and mass rallies in Minsk.

The last before the election rally in Minsk on August, 6th should in general have become the most mass rally in the history of Belarus and gathered on one stage the most popular groups in Belarus: Volski, Krama, J:Mors, Nizkiz, and Tor Band, but it was cancelled by the authorities for far-fetched reasons.

Meanwhile, on August, 6th, there was another event that made one more legendary song an anthem of the Belarusian protest – the song “Changes” by the group “Kino”.



In the Park of Peoples' Friendship, on August, 6th (where it was preliminarily planned to carry out the last pre-election rally), military men with their equipment and Aleksandr Solodukha celebrated the Railway Army Day; therefore, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, Veronika Tsepikalo, and Maria Kolesnikova decided to visit the Kyiv Square where there was the family holiday "Creativity Kaleidoscope".

The Kyiv Square was one of the six platforms in Minsk where the authorities allowed the presidential candidates to carry out their meetings/rallies, but during the last week of the election campaign all of them unexpectedly became occupied for various state-run events.

Uładzisiaŭ Sakałoŭski and Kiryl Hałanaŭ, who were DJs during this official event in the Kyiv Square, stopped Vitaliy Voronko's performance, who was singing the song "Father" ["Batska", i.e. Lukashenko], and started to play the song "Changes" by the group "Kino" instead, and lifted their hands up with the symbol "Victory".

After that, the guys were detained, arrested for 15 days, and after the term they fled to Lithuania as they were afraid of new arrests.



Uładzislau and Kіryła's act inspired artists and designers to create various arts. One of them is by Dmitriy Dmitriyev – it became the central street art in the “Square of Changes”¹⁷ – such a name was given to a courtyard by the inhabitants of the houses located at the junction of Chervyakov and Kachouška Streets and Smarhoŭski Trakt in Minsk.

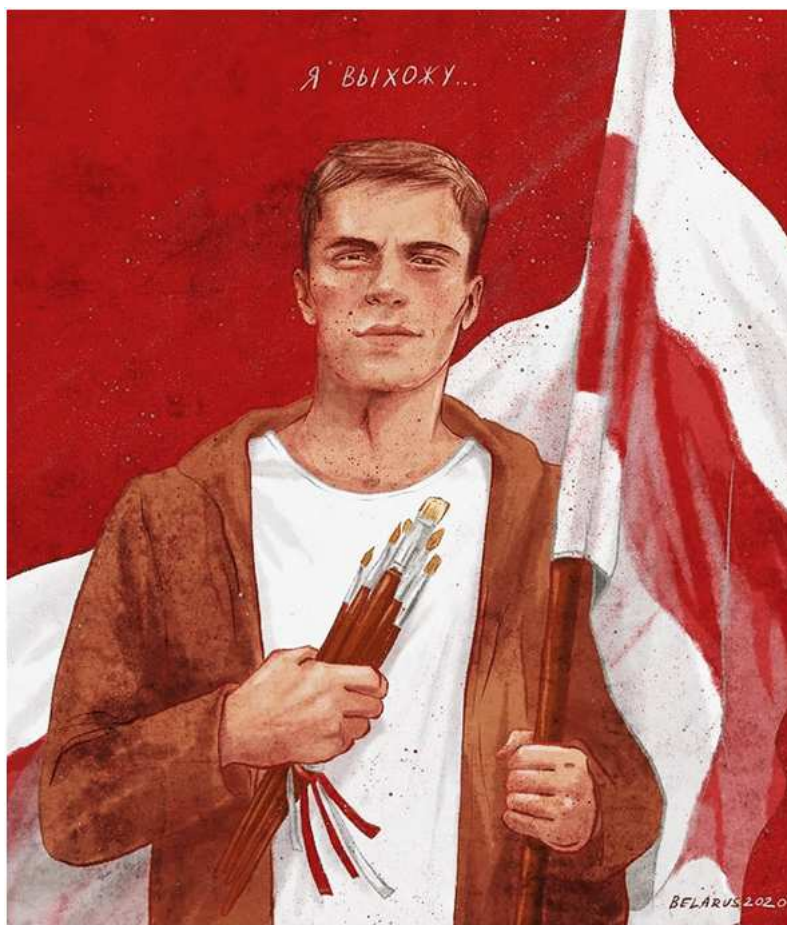
The further tragic events that occurred in the Square of Changes had to do with the artist Raman Bandarenka, who lived on Chervyakov Street and taught children to paint.

On November, 11th, 2020, Bandarenka saw in a local chat that unknown persons were removing white-red-white ribbons in the “Square of Changes” again; he left his house, met those persons who beat him very much, brought him to a police station where he was beaten again; the next day Raman died. His neighbors said that it was Raman who painted the mural with the DJs in their courtyard. This mural was damaged by the authorities tens of times, painted over in different ways, and the inhabitants re-created it again and again.

Raman's death became an occasion of not only a new wave of the protests, but also a new wave of creativity. The artist Hanna Radzko painted a poster with Raman, which was seen all around the world; Belarusian and foreign musicians, for example “Pomidor/OFF” and “Tantsy Minus”¹⁸, recorded their songs dedicated to Raman's last words in the local chat, “I'm leaving”.

¹⁷ https://be.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%88%D1%87%D0%B0_%D0%9F%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD

¹⁸ <https://youtu.be/EpDoGPBxhjo>



After these events, the song “Changes” received its Belarusian version in the project “Dignity Songs”, performed by Aleś Čumakoŭ¹⁹ (psaltery) and by Kaciaryna Karpickaia²⁰ (guitar); translated by Anatol Ivaščanka.

The strong art content filled the series of actions called “Women In White”. The first of these actions took place on August, 12th, 2020 in Minsk. Near the Kamaroŭski Market, women in white clothes with flowers appeared on the street – they were thus expressing their protest against the actions of agents of national security and their solidarity with the demonstrators, many of whom suffered during the protests. They were standing in a chain along Vera Khoruzhaya Street and asked not to beat peaceful people any more.

¹⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQz7pYc8_mA&ab_channel=gusliby

²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Nd_yNiCC9Y



Nina Bahinskaïa became the national female symbol of the Belarusian protest – the woman with the white-red-flag, who courageously and resolutely participated in all the actions/events in Minsk²¹. The video, where she told one of the OMON policemen, “I’m taking a stroll”²², so that he could let her go and not detain her, became viral, and these words gave birth to a considerable number of memes and began to be used in the form of various design, souvenir, and promo production.



²¹ <https://youtu.be/gSJPUyBE4-c>

²² <https://youtu.be/be9-CkQ2zuk>



Another female image that became one of the new protest symbols of Belarus is the painting “Eve”.

“Eve” is a painting by the Belarusian artist Chaïm Soutine, created in 1928 in Paris. It was purchased by Belgazprombank at the Sotheby’s auction in 2013 for 1,8 million USD and brought to Belarus to be added to the corporate collection of the bank. Since then it became the most expensive painting that is publicly exhibited in Belarus.

During the pre-election campaign, the authorities started to put pressure upon Belgazprombank and its former chairman Viktor Babariko. Criminal cases were initiated. On June, 14th, 2020, the chairman of the Belarusian state-run TV and Radio Company Ivan Eismont said that 150 paintings from the bank collection “are attached to the case”. All these paintings, including “Eve”, were removed from public access in the gallery “Art Belarus” in the Palace of Art in Minsk. After that, the painting “Eve” became a basis for political caricatures against the authorities that persecute the opposition and one of the protest symbols that is still actively used in different visual images and products.



The most popular songs about female solidarity and courage in Belarus were PyLai's "Women Do Not Walk"²³ and NaviBand's "A Girl In White"²⁴.

The popular project "Arzamas"²⁵ together with the new cultural project Wir.by²⁶ made a survey of Belarusian protest songs sung by Belarusians in the streets. It includes "Lullaby", "Pahonia", "Kupalinka", "Mighty God", "Three Turtles", "Simple Words" and others.

Among new works written already during the protests, the most popular and loved by people were the songs by the groups Nizkiz²⁷ and Tor Band²⁸.

Thanks to the initiatives "Tradition", "Hodna", and "Free Chorus", there appeared already four songbooks²⁹ and all who are interested in it can organize collective singing in their communities, courtyards, and settlements.

Summing up, it is possible to say that creativity in different forms became one of the main drivers of the protests in Belarus. Thousands of vivid and emotional songs, videoclips, drawings/paintings, posters, collages, and works of street art became not just reflections of the Belarusian events – they inspire the Belarusians to defend their rights, to fight for the truth and justice.

The created works emotionally depict the atmosphere of the protests that took place in Belarus since August, 9th, 2020, the heroes and torturers of the Belarusian revolution, the crimes of the regime and the Belarusians' feats, the people who were not frightened and continue to fight. Some of these works became legendary; they sounded during the protests; they were published in well-known magazines, sent as postcards to political prisoners, projected on the buildings of houses, drawn on walls, used as posters during protest actions/events, and put on tombs of new Belarusian heroes.

Additional materials

1) The project Chrysalis Mag's big archive of protest arts

<https://chrysalismag.by/>

<https://www.instagram.com/chrysalismagazine/>

²³ https://youtu.be/vXuJ_DcDbmQ

²⁴ <https://youtu.be/Sjc2FfjTCZM>

²⁵ https://arzamas.academy/mag/938-belarus_pesni

²⁶ <https://wir.by/be/article/piesni>

²⁷ <https://youtube.com/nizkiz>

²⁸ <https://youtube.com/torband>

²⁹ The songbooks can be downloaded free-of-charge: <https://symbal.by/spieuniki/>

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- 2) The project #культпротест Cultural Protest's big archive of protest posters
<https://cultprotest.me/>
 - 3) News on the cultural protest in Belarus is published by the Counterculture Ministry
<https://moc.media/>
 - 4) 100 best memes and posters of the Belarusan protests are collected by the portal kyky.org
<https://kyky.org/cult/100-luchshih-memov-i-plakatov-s-Belarusanih-protestov-da-da-tselaya-sotnya>

The phenomenon of the “courtyards” of the Belarusian Revolution

Mikhail Matskevich

Context

2020–2021 are full of phenomena and processes that need to be reflected upon and analyzed. One of such phenomena is the incipency of the “courtyard” [“dvor” in Belarusian and Russian]. The “courtyards” is a notion that appeared in the environment of the protesters, which means a spontaneous association of inhabitants of one microdistrict (e.g. in Minsk: Asanaliyeva, Guerrilla Street, etc.; more examples: <https://dze.chat>), who self-organize for various actions aimed at displaying their disagreement and protest against the de facto ruling authorities. While the protests were increasing, different independent mass media started to use this word in relation to associations in towns and villages. The phenomenon of the unexpected nascence of a large quantity of the “courtyards” is not analyzed yet, and consequently – while analyzing this question – we shall lean on our own experience in many respects.

By lapse of time, due to the incessant repressions on the part of the state, these associations were compelled to get structured, to provide safety of their members, and to change their activity methods, which naturally led to the creation of a culture of communication inside their groups, safety rules, and division of their work directions. In this connection, in the beginning of 2022, it is more correct to use the definition «local community» in relation to such associations. Further in the text, we shall use the definitions “courtyard” and «local community» that will differ as for their chronological (at the early stage of the Revolution – a courtyard) and quality indicators (the presence of the rules and culture of communication, joint stable activity – a local community).

Outside the limits of the present analysis, there will be associations characterized by the place of work and study, which are also wide-spread and deserve separate

attention. Mechanisms of their emergence and functioning are similar, but they have serious differences, too.

Local communities in Belarus and attempts of their creation/revival in the conditions of the post-Soviet system of local self-rule and governance

Local communities in Belarus' contemporary history have not turned into a subject of public politics or local politics due to various reasons¹. First of all, because of the post-Soviet culture of solving local problems. During the Soviet period, almost all public problems, whether it be a stolen bulb in the house or a polluting enterprise, were solved or stopped with the participation of the state. Citizens had no need to start communication with each other in order to solve common problems on the territory of their residence. Second, the political system itself did not spur the development and increase of the importance of local politics. Belarus derived the truncated understanding of local governance and self-rule, in which there was no place for elections of bodies of executive power; local councils still have rather a decorative status and possess symbolical powers. It goes without saying that the many years of the authoritarian regime have only conducted to Belarusian society's atomization.

Since the beginning of Belarus' independence, many noncommercial organizations and international institutions have been trying to revive/create local communities. This theme was frequently a «cross-cutting issue» in various topics and directions of external help: whether it be “green” projects at the local level or regional cultural actions/events – they considered local communities to be the associations of citizens who could be beneficiaries of a project and provide the sustainability of the results of this project or activity. Such theories of changes were often far from reality because of the absence of the local communities per se and/or there was an imitation of such communities. The work aimed at creating the conditions and carrying out the reforms, which would promote the revival/creation of such communities, encountered the authorities' strong resistance and did not lead to any considerable changes.

It was difficult to multiply the successes of noncommercial organizations in this direction upon the whole country so that it would result in qualitative and quantitative changes of the state of affairs.

¹ Formation and development of communities, Tatsiana Vadalazhskaya, Uladzimir Matskevich https://eurobelarus.info/files/22/86/Book_Community.pdf

The mobilization and self-organization of the “courtyards” in August 2020

The incipience of the “courtyards” after the revolution began was fostered by the presence of the places of online communication. Here, there are two different types of the origin of such online platforms. On the one hand, there were the already existing chats of houses, in which – before the 2020 events – people discussed various household questions: parking lot organization, noisy neighbors at night, fund raising to repair something at the house, etc. They used the messengers Viber and Telegram (subsequently, because of safety reasons, only Telegram remained). On the other hand, activists of the movement «The Country For Life» created numerous chats with the postfix «97%» (e.g. Serebryanka 97%, Ratomka 97%) and other activists created new chats of courtyards and separate houses. People began to discuss the 2020 events, later – they displayed their solidarity with the 2020 victims, and – as a result – they started organizing protest actions. In the majority of cases, members of communities think that their community appeared in August-September 2020².

Eventually, thanks to joint activity, people started to get acquainted with each other – as a matter of fact – to learn their neighbors, whom there had been no need to get acquainted with before. It is necessary to separately mention the organization of joint tea drinking, concerts, lectures in the courtyards of houses. During a certain period of time, law enforcement officers did not interfere, which gave people a chance to have joint experience and to become friends. With the change of the focus of the repressions – at the arising communities, active participants were forced to create separate chats with a smaller number of people, where they added only the people they knew and trusted. In some communities, such “narrowing” of the members of chats occurred several times: chats were liquidated after the detention of a participant or participants and then they were created again. As a result, there remained small groups of people who created their safety rules and discussed their joint activity. Of course, it led to the situation when there started problems with the replenishment of new members of communities – some participants “disappeared” due to various reasons (arrests, reasons of safety of one’s family, fear, nervous breakdowns and psychological problems, and many other things), and it was difficult to add new members because there might be undercover agents. Throughout all this time, the majority

² Belarus’ civil society in the political crisis situation: the condition and challenges. The report on the results of research, p. 39 // https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/needs_assessment_full_survey_full_version_rus_0.pdf

of protesters and their organized part (communities) supported and still support the requirements of the political staffs: to stop the violence, to free the political prisoners, to carry out new, fair elections. It is the methods and points of view of how it is possible to force the dictatorship to start negotiations and changes that differ much: violent methods or peaceful protests. After one and a half year of the repressions and the presence of only recognized political prisoners – 1,000 people³ (at the moment of the preparation of this article), the introduction of repressive laws and practices, mass lay-offs, etc., members of communities are seized with heaviness and smitten with fear. Many of them do not refuse to communicate with each other, but do not undertake any considerable and dangerous actions. Such a state of communities can be characterized as survival.

Territorial distribution, quantity indicators, kinds of activity, organization principles

At the moment of the preparation of this text, it is impossible to say with confidence the exact number of local communities and courtyards arisen during the Revolution. It is also impossible to present a method of their calculation – the majority of communities is clandestine and works secretly. If to accept the hypothesis that behind each public chat and channel there “hides” a community, then it is possible to define if not the exact quantity, then an order of figures at least. At the moment of the preparation of this document, the resource *dze.chat* totals about 700 public chats (at the end of 2020 there were 958⁴). More than a half of these chats are in Minsk and its agglomeration. Regional cities are also covered by chats in the quantity from 20 to 30 (Mahilou has the lowest number of such chats – 5). Not all centers of districts are covered by this sort of chats. While communicating with the organizations and initiatives, which work to develop and support local communities, it is also impossible to receive even a rough quantity of local communities; at the same time, all representatives of such organizations say that they cannot “cover” with their services all communities they have contacts with.

At the end of 2021, many local communities are in a “safe” mode and do not undertake any active actions. Basically, their activity consists of support to political prisoners and their families in the form of fund raising and rendering material aid, sending letters of support to jails; some of them support regional Telegram

³ The Human Rights Defending Center «Viasna» <https://prisoners.spring96.org>

⁴ Local Telegram groups/chats in January-May 2021 // https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2021_TG_Belarus-IV.pdf

channels. Many communities still carry out “guerrilla” actions: they place the national symbols in public places; anonymous actions with the subsequent publication of photos in Telegram channels. Also, members of communities consider it important to provide safety to members of communities in the Internet, and many organizations say there is a demand to learn the skills of digital safety throughout the whole time of the Revolution. Evaluating in the beginning of 2022 the data of the research “Belarus’ civil society in the political crisis situation: the condition and challenges”⁵ carried out in March-May 2021, it is possible to conclude subjectively that the dynamics of activities is narrowing.

Less often is it possible to find communities that – in addition to the aforesaid – defined their tasks not only as civic resistance, but also directed their efforts to “small cases” or development. For example, interaction with public utilities for the organization of actions aimed at cleaning the territory, creation of Belarusian-language content for social networks, help to other communities with digital safety and safety of communication.

It is also necessary to notice that there grows gradually the popularity of communities and Telegram channels of a radical orientation with appeals to violent acts in relation to the property and health of the authorities.

Why was there an “explosion” of local activity?

The reasons of the Revolution are: the disagreement with the results of the election, the authorities’ denial of the pandemic Covid-19, the opacity of the integration processes with the Russian Federation, the violence on August, 9th-10th, 2020, and «the disbalance in Belarus between the state development, on the one hand, and the development of society, on the other hand»⁶. However, the topic of local communities requires several additional profound theses.

Before the August events, researchers spoke about the crisis of institutional and interpersonal trust⁷. When the Revolution began, in the protest environment the

Belarus’ civil society in the political crisis situation: the condition and challenges. The report on the results of research, p. 41 // https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/needs_assessment_full_survey_full_version_rus_0.pdf

⁶ Aksana Shelest. Revolution in Belarus – factors and axiological orientations// <https://www.laender--analysen-de.translate.googleusercontent.com/publication/2020/09/21/oxana-shelest-bazovoe-trebovanie-dlya-vseh-korennoe-izmenenie-situatsii.html>

⁷ Interview «Aksana Shelest. The basic requirement for all – the basic change of the situation// <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/09/21/oxana-shelest-bazovoe-trebovanie-dlya-vseh-korennoe-izmenenie-situatsii.html>

words from the well-known song of the Russian rock group “Spleen” «We did not know each other until this summer» became quite popular, which meaning is that the “boom” of the Revolution at the initial stage generated a large number of interactions with unfamiliar people: neighbors at houses, people from various cities, of different trades, began to have joint emotionally rich experiences. For many of them, the quantity of contacts increased many times. Together with the personal existential choices of members of communities and the search for like-minded people, it generated the necessity to get united.

The Belarusian protest was marked by a high degree of self-organization and horizontalness – partially it was a compelled situation (exclusion from the country or arrests of the protest leaders). Such a situation generated the need to have local leaders and initiative people, and it, too, became one of factors of the development of local associations.

What can it give to «New Belarus»?

«New Belarus» is the word combination born inside the protest audiences; it means the total set of all points of view of how the country should be arranged and what totalitarian practices should not be applied in it.

The communities that appeared during the wave of the protest mobilization are “proto-communities”, but potentially they can develop. Many activists of communities say that a change of the political regime will make it possible to put new tasks⁸ (to get transformed into branches of political parties, NGOs, pre-election staffs of candidates for different levels of power, etc.).

In Belarus, there is a long-standing need to carry out an administrative-territorial reform, but in experts’ discussions the corner stone is the question of how this new division of the country should take place. Different variants are being considered: the presence of cities-drivers of the economy, ethnographic borders, the number of the population in cities, etc. The analysis of the phenomenon of the new local communities allows us to seriously consider them as one of factors while defining the borders of administrative territories and while establishing the mode of self-rule differentiated as for powers.

⁸ Belarus’ civil society in the political crisis situation: the condition and challenges. The report on the results of research, p. 43 https://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/needs_assessment_full_survey_full_version_rus_0.pdf

Comparison of the outbreak of civic activity in the post-election period in different election campaigns – the role of key social partners

Pawel Kazanecki

30 years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. A generation that longed for Soviet stability is now passing away; the generation which valued the Lukashenka's times for its stability and guaranteed social security, comparing to the social instability of perestroika, has now retired. In 2020, people who do not remember the Soviet times went out into the streets. The independence of Belarus is obvious to them. Their prospect is the rapid development of neighboring countries, such as Lithuania and Poland, high standard of living as in Western Europe and, above all, a huge disappointment with the Lukashenka's regime.

Presidential elections as a barometer of political life in Belarus

Alexander Lukashenka, immediately after gaining power after the democratic elections in 1994, has been getting rid of his political competitors and sought to marginalize other political movements.

In 1996, he finally consolidated his power through a constitutional coup d'état, without parliamentary approval. Despite a brief period of dual power and the attempt to hold the so-called alternative presidential elections in 1999, the dictatorship finally won. At that time, many important politicians left Belarus, such as Zianon Pazniak or Siamion Sharecki. Their departure initiated waves of emigration of opposition leaders after successive election campaigns. Numerous

politicians, especially from post-nomenclature circles, disappeared without a trace. Among them were the head of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs, Yury Zacharanka, the chairman of the Election Commission, Viktor Hanchar, and his assistant Dzmitry Krasouski.

The opposition political parties established during the perestroika period, even though they had their own clubs and factions in two parliamentary terms, gradually lost their influence on official political life after the introduction of authoritarian mechanisms. Before the 2001 elections, they formed the United Democratic Forces, which set the tone for the election campaign in the following years. In 2005, at the Congress of Democratic Forces, a joint candidate was selected, supported by a wide political spectrum – from communists (the Belarusian Party of Communists), through Social Democrats (Belarusian Social Democratic Party) and liberals from the United Civic Party (OGP), to conservative-Christian pro-independence parties, such as the Belarusian Popular Front “Review” (BPF), as well as by non-governmental organizations.

Aleksandar Milinkievic was a civic activist and was not associated with any party. However, thanks to his electoral legitimacy within the democratic forces, he became a symbol of the unification of the opposition. There was an attempt to break the common front, as in 2001, by pro-Russian Belarusian activists and journalists who nominated as their candidate the former chancellor of the State University in Minsk, Alexander Kazulin, who's one of the leading authors of the Lukashenka's ideology at universities. The 2006 elections allowed for the emergence of the opposition leader who became the face of the democratic movement for the Western world. Milinkevic put forward pro-European slogans, promoting change in the geopolitical vector of the country's development. His election program was focused on market economy and democratic system. He was honored with the Sakharov Prize and the Belarusian opposition was recognised for the first time abroad as a partner and a factor influencing the situation in that country. However, these were the last elections to maintain the unity of the opposition leaders. The attempt to strengthen the opposition's cooperation by establishing the Movement for Freedom failed. Moreover, in 2010, some Western countries supported the Russian-speaking part of the opposition and the *Govori Pravdu* [*Tell the Truth*] movement, which presented their candidate – the well-known Belarusian writer Uladzimir Nyaklyayev, who was supposed to avert this duality of the party-civic and post-nomenklatura opposition – that made Milinkievic resign from taking part in the elections, which ultimately shattered the opposition.

In the 2010 elections, alongside Nyaklyayev, ran: Andrei Sannikov – former Belarusian deputy minister of foreign affairs and leader of the European Belarus

Movement, Ales Michalevic – member of the BNF leadership, Jarasław Roman-chuk – OGP party politician, Vital Rymasheuski from the Party of Belarusian Christian Democrats, Ryhor Kostusieu – chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, Mikala Statkevich from the Belarusian Social Democratic Party. After the elections, all the candidates were arrested and released gradually. Most of Nyaklyayev's and Sannikov's staff members also faced arrests and court cases or left Belarus. Michalevic and Sannikov were temporarily in exile, and the entire action ultimately discredited the opposition in the eyes of general public, which was unaware of the scale and cruelty of the repressions that had befallen the candidates.

During these events political parties eventually lost their importance. The candidates selected by them in the next presidential elections were not recognized in society, and the term democratic opposition acquired unambiguously negative connotations. The authorities learned to play opposition politicians against each other, which only accelerated their discredit. The elections were no longer perceived as a mechanism for changing power, but were rather treated by leaders of party opposition as a way of promotion.

The events of 2020 changed this situation dramatically, when new candidates, who had not yet participated in the political life, appeared on the scene. They were: Viktor Babaryka, former director of Belgazprombank, Valery Tsepkalo, a longtime diplomat, at some point an ambassador to the United States, and most importantly the director of the Belarusian High Technology Park, the so-called Belarusian "silicon valley", where many specialists from the IT industry worked, and finally Sergei Tikhonovsky – a blogger who manages a large blogging network. For many, the standing up to the political struggle of those holding high office was a signal that there had been a split in Lukashenka's camp. No high-ranking Belarusian official would dare to speak out against Lukashenka without support from the Russian authorities. This was to be proved by the economic and social ties of all three candidates. Tikhonovsky was perhaps the least important political figure. However, his extensive blogger network was an effective propaganda tool, so from an electoral technology point of view, he was the technical candidate responsible for the mobilization campaign. Tikhonovsky's arrest, before he managed to register his candidacy, forced his staff to persuade Svetlana Tikhonovskaya to run in the elections.

Apart from Tikhonovsky, Babaryka was also arrested – on charges of financial mismanagement during his work at the bank. He was the strongest opponent to Lukashenka and collected 367,179 signatures of support, of which the Central Election Commission recognized 165,744, but nevertheless refused to register

him. The third candidate, Tsepkalov, submitted 158 682 signatures, of which 75 249 were considered correct, so he was also not registered. He fled from Belarus to Russia fearing the fate of his competitor. He also wrote a letter to President Putin asking him to intervene in the election process in Belarus.

In this way, the authorities united the opposition through their actions, and Tikhanovskaya became the epitome of the election process and increasing mobilization, and then social protest. None of the candidates presented a political program concerning the reforms of the state and the economy or even declared what the geopolitical orientation of the country would be. The words “Europe” or “European direction” were avoided at all costs, but friendly expressions were made towards Russia, and during the post-election demonstrations – statements that they were not anti-Russian. The only slogan of the candidates was the removal of Lukashenko from power, who in turn explicitly stated that the two main candidates were financed by Russia.

The campaign of collecting signatures by candidates has become a great common movement of citizens. It was a movement supported by the middle class in Minsk, small and medium-sized enterprises, IT workers and intellectuals. The change in social sentiment has become a key factor that has caused really strong involvement of the society and an increase in civic attitudes. The sharp decline in public support for Lukashenko and the change in social expectations opened the field for candidates in 2020 without a negative “oppositionist” badge. The spontaneity of the social outbreak against the “stolen” votes prevented the authorities from properly assessing the situation and for the first time they lost control of the election process.

As a result of the protests, Tikhanovskaya, who became the face of the protest, created Coordination Council. It was an amorphous body that put forward only current demands: calling new elections, freeing political prisoners and punishing atrocities committed during the demonstrations, but it created a feeling of creating a broad social representation. The deportation of Tikhanovskaya from the country and the arrest of the main leaders of the Coordination Council caused its political paralysis. It opened a wave of social repression on an unprecedented scale, which was noticed by the entire society, strongly polarized in politics. The election process itself ended according to the rigid scenario of the authorities. However, for the first time on such a scale, civil society has become a political entity, which has opened up new processes and a new situation in Belarus.

Civic mobilization in the following presidential elections

In 1994 the election campaign was limited to the presentation of candidates. It was conducted according to the post-Soviet standards of perestroika and no one thought about the importance of mobilizing the public to vote in elections. The importance of mobilization campaigns has become obvious in the Spring of 1996 during the demonstrations against constitutional coup d'état. Then it turned out that the protests were limited to the capital city and support for democratic values and the Constitution was minimal. In 2001, for the first time, a mobilization campaign was prepared under the slogan *Vybiraj!* (means: "Vote" or "Choose") with an optimistic logo of the sun. It sparked a lot of discussion among the opposition and social activists who saw sense in mobilizing for a candidate but not in mobilizing to participate in the elections. However, it was the civic activists' first attempt to enter society. They went out to the bazaars and shops, for the first time confronting voters who were anti-oppositionist. The campaign was coordinated by the Assembly of Pro-democratic Belarusian NGOs.

Simultaneously, for the first time, a more radical election campaign of "*Zubr*" was prepared, which on the one hand was a negative election campaign against Lukashenka, and on the other hand encouraged young people to protest in the streets. The campaign gathered many young activists from all regions of the country, and finally prompted them to come to Minsk on the day of the elections to organize a protest in *Kastrychnicka Square*. The protest was organised by opposition politicians who felt they had lost the elections. The *Vybiraj!* and the failure of the elections campaign, on the one hand, discouraged many NGOs from any involvement in the electoral processes. On the other hand, it gave many activists the experience to prepare the *Za Svabodu* campaign in 2006, which eventually became a positive identification mark of Milinkievic and under this mark he united the socio-political movement after the 2006 elections. At the same time, the youth, organized in the *Zubr Movement*, prepared a pro-European campaign called *Jeans Revolution*, which was to be associated with the canvas of denim trousers and to refer to the colors of the European flag. Simultaneously the negative campaign "*Khopic!*" – *Enough!* Was organized. The result of the mobilization was a gathering of young people on *Kastrychnicki Square* and, despite the OMON (special police force) barrier, the creation of the protest tent town, modeled on the Ukrainian protest of the Orange Revolution, lasted two weeks, before all participants were arrested. It was called "*Kastus Kalionouski Square*" and it was a symbol of youth protest for several years.

In 2010, the desire to defend their votes mobilized voters to attend the demonstrations at Independence Square in 2010, where many opposition candidates stood together. Part of the protest was traditionally held at Kastychnicka Square. However, the brutal dismissal of these demonstrations discouraged the public from speaking out in subsequent election campaigns. The arrests for the first time triggered a mass wave of solidarity with those arrested.

2020 elections, when the social moods have changed, were a pretext for the general mobilization and creation of new local civic environments, starting from courtyard groups, through student protest committees and workers' strike committees. The slogan under which the voters initially united was "Justice". However, as the elections progressed, the demand for "Fair Elections!" has become an important slogan. Social networks have broken through the information monopoly of state television. There was a growing feeling that the authorities had "stolen" the votes. When three women became the symbol of the elections: Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Veranika Tsepkalo and Marya Kalesnikova, the unifying motto was: "We Believe, We Can, We Will Win". The protest itself was very decentralized. Demonstrations were held spontaneously in various parts of the city. Huge crowds at Stella in the Minsk center gathered spontaneously and spontaneously dispersed. Although they gave a sense of unity and strength, they also showed a lack of leadership. There was spontaneous coordination in social networks, which played a key mobilizing role here.

Non-governmental organizations resigned from any participation in the election process, except for organizations dealing with election observation and defense of the repressed. And the revolution itself has become a revolution of the middle class, entrepreneurs and freelancers as IT workers – people who are used to urban culture and, above all, ready to take on civic responsibility. The emerging urban social fabric played a major role here. Dozens of flash mobs, happenings and street actions were convened spontaneously. It is interesting that over time the protesters raised the historical national symbols of the white-red-white flag and the *Pahonia* coat of arms, which until then were rather symbols of unpopular political opposition.

Election observation

In 2001, the Human Rights Center *Viesna* was responsible for the organization of the observation, together with the network of the Belarusian Association of Resource Centers – BARC. The network tried to deal not only with movements in the electoral law, but also with the alternative counting of votes. After the

elections, these organizations were liquidated and stripped of their legal status. The network of observers, organized by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, officially chaired by Miechyslav Hryb, back then a deputy to the Supreme Council and it was concentrated on monitoring of violation of law. From then, election monitoring was carried out by cooperating human rights organizations called Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections. This observation network reports have become the basis for the international community for not recognizing the election results through all the election campaigns.

Before the 2006 elections, a social observer network was being prepared and it took form of the *Partnyorstva* Organization. However, after the parliamentary elections in 2004, it was liquidated by the authorities, and its four leaders went to prison. Since 2006, both registered political parties and political groups formed a joint election observation called *Prava Vybaru – Right of Choice*. It was one of the most important joint projects of political parties, which survived several election campaigns and allowed the fragile structures of opposition parties to be maintained, and was one of the few effective mechanisms for public participation by political structures for many years. This movement's reports became the basis for political structures in Europe.

In 2020, social networks of election observation were also established, created by business circles. These included the *Chesnye Lyudi (the Honest People)* network, which conducted election observations without training observers, but had a very wide area coverage of polling stations. The GOLOS website also took part in organizing citizens, which allowed every citizen to record violations online during the election process. It also mobilized people for making photo of their ballot papers, which allowed to make parallel counting of votes, presenting falsifications. Widespread of communication in social networks have enabled a much more efficient way of collecting information. These projects never fully summarized the results of the monitoring. However, they had an impact on mobilizing citizens and made a large part of the public aware of the elections falsification.

Summary

The most important feature of the events of 2020. was the awakening of the Belarusian society. Hundreds of thousands of citizens went out into the streets of Minsk. Demonstrations took place in every city in Belarus and in the most of local centers. The fact that Belarusian society has gained subjectivity in the political process distinguishes the 2020 election process from the previous 30 years of the presidential elections in Belarus. The last time Minsk saw such crowds only

during the perestroika period. The immediate cause of dissatisfaction of the Belarusian society, which undermined trust in the government, was the deep conviction of a significant part of Belarusians that the elections had been rigged. This belief was reinforced by the brutal mass repression obvious to the whole of society. About 35,000 people went through arrests and repressions. The cost of these choices for the social fabric of the country is enormous. However, it gave start to completely new processes in the country that will be shaped by a new dynamic geopolitical situation in Europe.

The 2020 election: missed opportunities. The catastrophe in Belarus as a pretext of the war in Ukraine

Aliaksandr Atroshchankau

For Belarus, the 2020 presidential election became a turning point when everything did change. On the eve of the election, different forecasts were voiced, but none of experts could assume that just in one and a half year Belarus would become a pariah, that hundreds of thousands of people would be compelled to flee the country, and that Belarus would happen to be on the threshold of war against Ukraine.

The disposition before the election

In order to understand why in Belarus there happened what happened in 2020, it is necessary to evaluate the situation in the country and around it on the eve of the events. After all, according to the majority of political scientists and experts, nothing augured such a dramatic and tragic outcome. The majority of observers foretold Lukashenko's next "elegant" victory and crackdown of insignificant protests like it was during the presidential election in 2015 (even those who were meant to observe it due to the nature of their profession observed it with hardly veiled boredom).

Indeed, according to many formal signs, for Lukashenko, the situation developed very well. The "old" opposition guided by the national symbols and European choice of Belarus, as a matter of fact, was destroyed after the election campaign and protests in 2010. The propaganda and long-term repressions forced representatives of the democratic movement from public space. Several leaders left the country; the rest became marginalized – society was not interested in them.

Everything came up roses on the international scene, too. By the beginning of 2020, after their efforts of many years, Lukashenko's lobbyists, Vladimir Makei's team, and numerous experts with different degrees of information awareness and public spirit managed, at last, to inculcate in the consciousness of the conditional «collective West» the thesis that Alexander Lukashenko, who is certainly a dictator, is simultaneously the guarantor of Belarus' sovereignty and will never give it to Russia – at least due to his own personal mercantile interests. It does not attest, however, to the high level of professionalism of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its assistants. The very situation in the region could not develop more successfully for Alexander Lukashenko. Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 substantially nulled the evil deeds of the Belarusian regime against its own people. The prospect of the Russian tanks in 180 kilometers from Warsaw and in 100 km from Kyiv worried the western politicians incomparably more than human rights in Belarus. Leaping ahead, it is possible to say that the 2022 events demonstrated that the dependence of the presence of tanks on the border on the situation with the implementation of human rights in Belarus is much more direct than it had seemed before to many people.

Anyhow, Belarusian-American relations began to defrost. In February 2015, Vladimir Makei, head of Belarus' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met with Eric Rubin, Deputy Head of the State Department, and in October – after a number of symbolical gestures – the sanctions imposed after the crackdown of the opposition in 2010 were suspended. In the ensuing years, Lukashenko used dexterously enough the disagreements with the Kremlin to strengthen the positions on the western direction. Thus, in August 2019, Lukashenko met with John Bolton, US presidential national security adviser, and in February 2020 there was the first for 25 years visit to Minsk of US Secretary of State. Mike Pompeo brought Lukashenko an offer to weaken Belarus' dependence on Russia's energy carriers, demanding nothing in exchange.

The results of this historic meeting were more than tangible. Already on May 15th the trader United Energy Trading through the intermediary of the American company Getka and the Polish company UNIMOT entered into an agreement and tankers with American oil for Belarus went to Klaipeda¹.

The relations with the EU developed at full speed as well. The sanctions were cancelled in 2015–2016. Belarus received tens of millions of dollars on the modernization of the border and infrastructure development in the frontier

¹ UNIMOT Head about the deliveries of oil from the USA: Someone won't like it // <https://reform.by/glava-unimot-opostavkakh-nefti-iz-usa>

regions²; only in 2018–2019, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development invested in various infrastructural projects, modernization of the bank system, and development of business not less than 700 million euros. In April 2020, the agreements on simplification of the visa regime and readmission with the European Union came into force.

Other directions developed, too. In Minsk, there was the annual international forum «Minsk Dialogue»; the Tripartite Contact Group aimed at solving the situation in eastern Ukraine worked. Lukashenko declared that Belarus is «the donor of stability» in the region, and on the eve of the NATO Summit in November 2019 the Secretary General of the Alliance called Belarus a partner and said that he did not see any threats on the part of Belarus.

Today, when Belarus participates in the aggression against Ukraine, it is difficult to believe that such a situation took place only two years ago. It was so good enough for everybody that the majority of experts were sure that the West would turn a blind eye to the falsification of the forthcoming election in 2020, recognize Lukashenko as a legitimate president, and agree on a certain level of violence in relation to the Belarusian people³.

Why was practically all, who tried to predict the events in Belarus and even should have envisaged them due to their profession, mistaken?

Changes in society

Everybody who predicted a rueful nonsensical campaign with the foreseeable result and insignificant protests did not consider such a simple factor as the Belarusian people. More precisely – the changes that happened since the elections in 2015, 2010, and, especially, 1994. Between July 1994, when during the only one in their history free election the Belarusian people with the overwhelming majority of votes chose Alexander Lukashenko, and August 2020 – 26 years have elapsed. It is the term required for the alternation of generations. Belarusian society did not just change – it physically became different.

The society structure changed as well. Some economic liberalization led to the nascency of a small layer of well-off people. It is necessary to separately mention

² The forgotten millions. How much means Belarus has received from the European Union to strengthen the border? // <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/09-07-2021-zabytye-milliony-skolko-deneg-belarus-poluchila-ot-evrosoyuza-na-ukreplenie-granitsy/>

³ See, for example: Valeriy Kovalevsky: The USA wanted to recognize the election if there was nothing extraordinary // <https://reform.by/230938-valerij-kovalevskij-ssha-hoteli-priznat-vybory-esli-ne-sluchitsja-nichego-jekstraordinarnogo>

the Belarusian «silicon valley» phenomenon. Decree №8 «About digital economy development» came into force on March, 28th, 2018; according to it – companies and individual entrepreneurs registered in the High Technologies Park are free from the majority of taxes, including the profit tax, until January, 1st, 2049. Such support of the IT sphere resulted in the fact that in 2019 the share of the IT sector provided a half of the gross national product growth⁴. As of July 2020, 886 companies with 65,000 employees were registered in the HTP⁵. The majority of the employees lived in Minsk and the Minsk Rajon [District]. Under the conditions of a rather poor by European measures country, the incipency of several tens of thousands of people with very good salaries in a two-million city led to an incredible effect. There was a fast growth of small and middle businesses providing services and infrastructure for the new average and above average classes; the great boom in building set in. New residential areas needed cafés, restaurants, barbershops, tattoo parlors, private day nurseries, and many other things. Naturally, the most part of bonuses was received by the capital and its suburbs, but the effect covered other big cities as well.

Of course, the process described above did have its public and political consequences. An IT specialist became a symbol of a successful person in Belarus – a self-made person who mastered the skills not understood by the majority of inhabitants and found a job in a company that has nothing to do with the state or even Belarus. Even physically, this person should not necessarily be present there where he/she works. This person-symbol is successful only thanks to his/her brain, labor, and perseverance. Small and middle businessmen from other fields of activity also felt they were not obliged to the state. For them, the state was only infinite inspections, checks of supervising bodies, and penalties. The new middle class learned to bear responsibility for their life and for their success, and it was only a matter of time when this class emancipated and wanted to bear responsibility if not yet for the country, then for the organization of their own life in it.

Moving to the catastrophe

However, the picture of the world of the potential candidates who corresponded to the demands of the changed society was far from the condition of political reality in the country. In May 2020, Victor Babariko declared that he did not

⁴ <https://www.naviny.media/article/20191007/1570426753-aytishniki-stali-drayverom-beloruskoy-ekonomiki>

⁵ 71 companies became part of the HTP. In total, there are already 886 companies // <https://tech.onliner.by/2020/07/10/v-pvt-prinyali-71-kompaniyu-vsego-ix-uzhe-886>

believe in the mass falsifications of election in Belarus if the majority of people really voted for an alternative candidate⁶. Up to August 9th (and even some time after) the team of Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, who “replaced” all the alternative candidates, adhered to similar ideas, staking on exclusively lawful, legal ways of solving the situation.

Apparently, in this case, it is possible to speak about some kind of a “survivorship bias” when the people, who have achieved certain successes in business, culture, public or academic activity, automatically transferred their perceptions, vision, and business models to the political struggle sphere, counting on similar results. If in any other country such an approach could bring results, then under the conditions of the Belarusian specificity it could only result in nothing else but a catastrophe, which did occur.

Propaganda is quite pertinent to political campaigns; it helps to mobilize supporters and to raise society’s activity. And there were lots of quality creative things. The memes of the 3% of Lukashenko’s supporters and other recognized symbols of the campaign permeated into national consciousness. Still, the danger of propaganda is that you yourself start to believe in it. And during certain moments it seemed that the situational leaders of the campaign and protests did believe that nobody supported Lukashenko, that agents of national security only waited for the moment to come to the side of the people, that in order to replace the ruling regime it was enough to vote, to go out to the streets, and to put your fingers in the form of a heart. Is it necessary to be surprised that in such a situation the overwhelming majority of the protesters were not ready for such a level of violence during the crackdown of the peaceful protest actions and for the depth of the cleansing of society after the suppression of these protests? The overwhelming majority of participants of the protests were representatives of the “non-beaten generation» who had not experienced the cruelty of agents of national security during the crackdown of mass protests in the past due to their age or because they had not known about it as they had considered themselves to be «out of politics».

Could someone warn these people? Theoretically, representatives of the “old” opposition could compensate want of the experience in the political life and the street struggle of the candidates’ young and ambitious teams, but at this moment these representatives had no corresponding tools in the form of the influential mass media and mass structures and – the main thing – weight among the young

⁶ Babariko declared he did not believe in falsifications and was not a sparring partner of Lukashenko// <https://reform.by/babariko-zajavl-chto-ne-verit-v-vozmozhnost-falsifikacii-i-ne-javljaetsja-sparring-partnerom-lukashenko>

generation and their own success stories. As a result, the representatives of the “old” opposition were perceived by the “new” opposition as strange naphthalene people with the surnames from the 1990s, and the experienced oppositionists looked at the neophytes as if at infantile people who somehow managed to live till 2020 without noticing dictatorship in the country. These groups had nothing to talk about until a certain moment. However, these distinctions were instantly erased after the events in summer-autumn 2020. At a certain stage, the *Weltanschauung*, the leaders’ perceptions of Belarus’ geopolitical orientations, and their persons in general ceased to matter at all. All mutual claims and misunderstanding lost any topicality. The protest got instantly painted in white-red-white color. This unification took place on the streets, in prisons, in apartments of casual people where participants of the protests were hiding from the police, in the queues of people who waited near prisons in order to bring food and things to their relatives and strangers. This unification took place in emigration, too, where representatives of different waves of emigration from Belarus demonstrated an unprecedented level of unity of the Diaspora.

The pre-planned atrocity

There is a belief that the cruel and mass repressions against the protesters, which began long before the election day, but after August 9th received an unparalleled scale, had a spontaneous character and became a consequence of Lukashenko’s fright and his unpreparedness for such large-scale protests. Probably, the mass character of the protests was not expected by Lukashenko, but the cruel repressions, most likely, had been carefully planned in advance.

There is a version that Lukashenko’s Administration considered a soft variant that would allow Lukashenko to preserve his power and to achieve the recognition of the election by the West. It ostensibly included the announcement of Lukashenko’s narrow victory (51–55%), his electoral defeat in Minsk, and the second place of Babariko or any other alternative candidate and, probably, even his/her invitation to work in the government. It would allow Lukashenko to avoid mass indignation. Most likely, we shall never find out whether such a variant of actions was really considered, but all the disposition of the year 2020 says that Lukashenko did have such a window. But, instead of using it, minimum since the end of May 2020, he preferred the maximum aggravation, and the authorities made everything to provoke the mass protest by August 2020. It included the cynical arrests of the leading candidates, the authorities’ defiant clownery, and the humiliating 80% of those who ostensibly voted for Lukashenko. While his opponents

collected signatures, carried out rallies, meetings, and concerts, Lukashenko was preparing for a power variant. He visited all the bases of special divisions, locked agents of national security in the barracks and led them to the condition of berserk rage, bought a rich arsenal of special means aimed at suppressing protests from manufacturers worldwide.

Two months prior to the election, he openly reminded of the events in Andijan and declared his readiness to organize a similar massacre⁷. And, actually, he did organize it. Let with a smaller number of victims, but with not a smaller number of spavined destinies, separated families, and people who were forced to flee the country. Lukashenko never cared of the Belarusians' lives, but his own position cannot be called the winner's position either. His regime has no chances to wash from the atrocities committed against the people. The foreign policy escapades in the form of the capture of the Ryanair plane and the man-made migrant crisis led to the unprecedented economic sanctions against the country. The refusal of relations with the West led to the actual loss of sovereignty and the situation close to external occupation when on the territory of the country there is an unlimited quantity of the Russian forces Belarus does not control.

Conclusions

Today's position of Belarus is caused by the decisions accepted in the past. Decisions of a nationwide scale not always have momentary consequences. The votes for the product of a negative selection of the Soviet system, who did not hide his beliefs and his contempt for everything Belarusian, became a choice of post-Soviet Belarusians, and their children pay for it today. Twenty six years later, Lukashenko has no positive proposal for Belarus – he has none in general. Today's Belarus is on the threshold of war; prisons are overflowed with patriots; and the sanctions for the aggression against Ukraine will almost inevitably lead to the total impoverishment of the population. Unfortunately, this situation was programmed back in 1994, and a considerable part of today's Belarusians does not bear responsibility for it. On the contrary, in 2020 the Belarusians tried to rectify this error and attempted seriously to change the course of history. It was a historical choice that will have its consequences. They will not come quickly, but the course of history has accelerated. Probably, it will not be necessary to wait for 26 years for the consequences of what was started in 2020.

⁷ Lukashenko: "Have you forgotten the way Karimov suppressed the putsch in Andijan, having killed thousands of people? Well, we can remind."// <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/lukashenko-zabyli-kak-karimov-v-andizhane-podavil-putch-rasstrelyav-tysyachi-chelovek-nu-tak-my-napomnim/>

From resistance to revolution. Belarusan anarchist movement in the 2020 protests

Aleksander Laniewski

Introduction¹

Gradually growing public and social unrest in Belarus erupted after the rigged presidential election and as a reaction to the unbridled brutality of the law enforcement agencies in August 2020. This initiated a long process of social transformation that I call the Belarusan revolution. Participants in every, even in the most peaceful revolution at the beginning of the 21st century used various forms of violence². However, I do not consider the events in Belarus as yet another color revolution³ (peaceful revolution or external revolution), but as some massive public social mobilization, which includes both peaceful activities (e.g. demonstrations), and violence – in an attempt to change the political system and international relations of the state in a relatively short time, as well as to transform the social structures⁴. At the same time, I assume that “the monopoly of state power, usually associated with the habit of obedience, was broken”⁵. The weakness of the old opposition and the lack of the well-formed structures of the new one meant that in order to fundamentally change social, economic and political relations into a wider movement, representatives of various groups and professions started to associate in solidarity: women, students, retirees, doctors, lecturers, workers and

¹ The text was published originally in Polish language in the magazine “Sprawy Międzynarodowe”, 2021, t. 74, nr 2 issn 0038-853x.

² J. Chodak, *Rewolucje niezbrojne. Nowe scenariusze polityki kontestacji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2019.

³ H. Giebień, “Kolorowe rewolucje” na Białorusi – czy powiodą się?, “Wschodnioznawstwo” 2015, nr 1, s. 181–197.

⁴ See: J. Chodak, *Teorie rewolucji w naukach społecznych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2012, s. 21.

⁵ P. Amann, *Revolution. A redefinition*, “Political Science Quarterly” 1962, vol. 77, No. 1, s. 38.

entrepreneurs⁶. I will risk saying that the only organized political force that took an active part in the street protests were the anarchists⁷.

Anarchism presupposes that the world can run itself without leadership and power, and that societies are able to function on the basis of the voluntary self-organization of individuals and groups. Freedom is the highest value for anarchists, and, in their opinion, it is limited by various types of hierarchy and oppression. Using the typology developed by researchers of social movements, it can be stated that anarchism is a progressive, radical, revolutionary movement that has a local and global dimension at the same time, and uses peaceful and forceful methods aimed at both individuals and whole society⁸. It does not plan to achieve the necessary fixed goal, but shows constant dynamism and a constant pursuit of the ideal. By advocating the solution of problems without intermediaries using the tactic of direct action, it often uses radical political practice. Instead of representative democracy and parliamentarianism, it proposes a grass root self-organization based on solidarity, mutual aid and horizontal social relations. Building a community of convictions and activating unconventional collective actions are to be used to overthrow state institutions and radically transform socio-economic relations into decentralized and non-hierarchical ones⁹. My thesis is that the anarchist movement played an important role in anti-regime social demonstrations in Belarus. The protests of the summer and autumn of 2020 were both the culmination of the radicalization of Belarusian anarchism and an examination of the maturity of this socio-political trend. Although the revolution did not bring the expected results and the anarchists suffered a wave of brutal repressions, they managed to accumulate some political capital: they gained not only increased interest in their activities, but also confidence in anarchists as an independent socio-political force.

⁶ See: J. Goodwin, *No other way out. States and revolutionary movements 1945–1991*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

⁷ They also treated the events in Belarus as a revolution: I. Olinevič, *Belorusskaâ revolúciâ*, “YouTube” [online], 9 IX 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBU-E8Ro8N8>>; *Anarhisty Belarusi: Народ сам пачав закладаць прынцыпы анархii*, “Прамен” [online], 5 I 2021 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2021/01/anarhisty-belarusi-narod-sam-pachau-zakladats-pryntsyipy-anarhii/>>.

⁸ I assume that a social movement is “a collective, organized, enduring, and non-institutional challenge to rulers, power elites, or cultural beliefs and practices”. J. Goodwin, J.M. Jasper, Editor’s introduction, [w:] *The social movements reader. Cases and concepts*, ed. J. Goodwin, J.M. Jasper, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 2014, s. 4.

⁹ Zob. P. Malenowicz, *Ruch anarchistyczny w Europie wobec przemian globalizacyjnych przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Difin, Warszawa 2013; *The Palgrave handbook of anarchism*, ed. C. Levy, M.S. Adams, Palgrave Macmillan, Springer 2018.

Outline of anarchist activity in the Republic of Belarus

The roots of anarchism in Belarus go back to the end of the 19th century¹⁰, while the modern anarchist movement is thirty years old¹¹ and is quite a noticeable actor on the Belarusian opposition scene, especially after 2010, when international human rights organizations recognized as many as five of its activists as political prisoners¹². Until then, the activity of the movement was relatively peaceful, focusing on anti-fascism, independent culture, anti-military and anti-police issues, environmental problems and solidarity actions. Despite the fact that it was focused on workers' rights from the very beginning, in three decades it failed to create trade unions operating on syndicalist principles. On the other hand, festivals and social forums were organized; press, leaflets and brochures were published, and finally, street protests were actively involved.

Among the high-profile actions preceding the events in 2020, anarchists hurled incendiary bottles at the building of the tax office in Homiel in 2017 and at the detention center in Minsk in 2019. Their participation in the mass protests in reaction to Decree No.3 was also spectacular.¹³ In spring 2017, unexpectedly, they led a 1,000-person march in Brest, which was not approved by the city authorities, and in the following year they blocked one of the most important national roads M1 (Brest-Minsk), protesting against the construction of a battery factory¹⁴. The authorities responded with repressions and propaganda campaigns in the state media¹⁵.

¹⁰ Ў.Ё. Глушак, "Революция умерла! Даздраўствуе рэвалюцыя!" Анархізм у Беларусі (1902–1927), ШСС, Санкт-Петербург 2015.

¹¹ Гл. П. Канавалячык, *Anarchy in BY*. Анархістычны рух у Беларусі, Падручнік рэвалюцыянера, Менск 2002; А. Ланеўскі, Ад пратэсту да супраціву: : вакол "справы беларускіх анархістаў", "Палітычная сфера" 2013, № 20 (1), сс. 99-121.

¹² Гл. І. Аліневіч, Еду ў Магадан, "Беларуская турэмная літаратура", Мінск 2017; М. Дзядок, *Фарбы паралельнага свету*, 2017.

¹³ The mass demonstrations of Belarusians in February and March 2017 were triggered by the start of enforcement of the unemployment tax, which was introduced in April 2015 by Decree No. 3 'On the prevention of social parasitism'. This document affected about half a million people, ordering every citizen who worked less than 183 days during the year to pay about 200 euros in tax. In the face of economic stagnation and rising unemployment, this triggered the largest social protests in Belarus since 2011.

¹⁴ История революционных действий 2010–2019 года, "Революционное действие" [online], 11 I 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/2020/01/istoriya-revolutsionnogo-deystviya-2010-2019-goda/>>.

¹⁵ A. Łaniewski, Białoruscy anarchiści pod celownikiem propagandy, "Atak" 2018, nr 8, s. 11–12.

In the summer of 2020, apart from smaller groups and a number of individuals (e.g. blogger Mikola Dziadok¹⁶), the Belarusian anarchist movement was represented by the following organizations considered by the authorities to be extremist: *Pramien* (Прамень) – a socio-revolutionary group established in 2015, running an information and analytical portal and participating in mass demonstrations; Anarchist Black Cross “Belarus” (Анархический чёрный крест Беларусь, hereinafter: ABC) – focusing on providing financial, legal and information assistance to repressed anarchists and anti-fascists¹⁷; Revolutionary Action (Революционное действие, hereinafter: RA) – a group operating since 2005, professing the ideas of anarcho-communism and illegalism, which initiated the radicalization of the movement.

Participation in the revolution

On the eve of the presidential election in 2020, anarchists had already made an appeal to the public to protest. They did not support any of the candidates, opting for the greatest possible decentralization of power and maximum self-governance¹⁸. They put forward, among others demands, the demand for president's resignation, as well as for the introduction of political amnesty and direct democracy^{19,20}. By proposing their own strategies to overthrow the regime²¹, they signaled that it could not be done at the ballot box²². They criticized plans to gather in one easy to pacify place²³, and did not reveal their organizational affiliation in

¹⁶ “Mikola Dzadok / Mikola Dziadok” [online, accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://mikola.noblogs.org/>>.

¹⁷ “Anarhičeskij černyj krest Belarus” [online, accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://abc-belarus.org/>>.

¹⁸ Что делать 9 августа?, “Pramen” [online], 8 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/chto-delat-9-avgusta/>>.

¹⁹ Какой кандидат спасет нас от диктатуры?, “Pramen” [online], 7 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/kakoj-kandidat-izbavit-belarus-ot-diktatury/>>.

²⁰ 5 требований без компромиссов, “Pramen” [online], 14 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/5-trebovanij-bez-kompromissov/>>.

²¹ Стратегия революции снизу. 8 тактик свержения режима Лукашенко, “Revolucionnoe Dejstvie” [online], 21 VI 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/2020/06/strategiya-nizov-voj-revolutsii-8-taktik-sverzheniya-rezhima-lukashenko/>>.

²² Завышенные ожидания и неизбежное разочарование? Что ждет общество 9 августа?, “Revolucionnoe Dejstvie” [online], 6 VI 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/2020/08/zavyshennye-ozhidaniya-i-neminuemoe-razocharovanie-chto-zhdet-obshchestvo-9-avgusta/>>.

²³ Ловушка Стеллы. Почему есть плохой план на 9 августа и как насчет плана Б?, “Revolucionnoe Dejstvie” [online], 8 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/en/2020/08/lovushka-stely-chem-ploh-plan-na-9-avgusta-i-chto-naschet-plana-b/>>.

the riots between 9th and 11th August²⁴. Minsk became the focal point of the clashes, and the anarchists from Baranavičy and Hrodna participated in further protests. At the same time, they criticized the opposition for endangering people, wasting time and for the ill-considered actions²⁵, and warned the protesters not to celebrate the victory prematurely²⁶.

In their struggle, anarchists have repeatedly advocated rebellion as a human right. It is the state as such, which, in their opinion, epitomizes violence, has a monopoly on terror, and is the source of repression and torture. Therefore, there is a continuous war in which the forces are not equal, and thus any response from Belarusian society is, in their opinion, an attempt to save lives, self-defense against uncontrolled state violence²⁷. However, they criticized the mindless dedication of Belarusians in the fight for the sacralization of national symbols, accusing the participants of the protests that, risking their own freedom, they focused the protest solely on a symbolic struggle (e.g. hanging flags on a balcony) and not a real confrontation with the regime²⁸.

One of the basic issues raised by anarchists was the fight against the agencies of repression. In 2017, the Revolutionary Action founded the “Banda Luki” lustration portal, which to some extent became the prototype of the Black Book of Belarus initiative, where information is collected on officers of law enforcement agencies²⁹ and on officials supporting the regime³⁰. Ihar Alinievich attempted to

²⁴ Эволюция протеста и репрессий в Беларуси глазами анархиста, “Pramen” [online], 14 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/evolyutsiya-protesta-i-repressij-v-belarusi-glazami-anarhistki/>>; Uprising in Belarus, “You Tube” [online], 3 IX 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fU-uuZ3cYA>>.

²⁵ Не давайте Власти Пьередишку!, “Revolucionnoe Dejstvie” [online], 16 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/en/2020/08/ne-davat-vlastyam-peredyshku/>>; A gde plan v “Plane pobedy”?, “Revolucionnoe Dejstvie” [online], 31 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/en/2020/08/a-gde-plan-v-plane-pobedy/>>.

²⁶ Рано радоваться победе, “Pramien” [online], 31 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/rano-radovatsya-pobede/>>.

²⁷ Государство и есть насилие, “Pramien” [online], 26 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/gosudarstvo-i-est-nasilie/>>.

²⁸ Сакрализация символов в протесте, “Революционное действие” [online], 31.01.2021 [accessed: 01.05.2021]: <<http://revbel.org/2021/01/sarkalizatsiya-simvolov-v-proteste>>.

²⁹ There are several texts against this issue: Почему мы выступаем против инициативы by_pol?, “Прамень” [online], 27.11.2020 [accessed: 01.05.2021]: <https://pramen.io/ru/2020/11/pochemu-my-vystupaem-protiv-initsiativy-by_pol/>; Нет военных – нет войны, Прамень, 30.08.2020, leaflet, authors’ archive; А. Стоев, Зачем милиция? Анархический взгляд на проблему милиции, Прамень, Минск 2020.

³⁰ “Banda Luki” [online, accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://bandaluki.info/>>.

make a psychological analysis of the brutality of the law enforcement forces³¹. Finally, there were proposals to liquidate the police and replace it with self-defense units³². Moreover, there were calls for sabotaging the cameras³³, critically assessing the Kipod facial recognition system developed by cooperating with the KGB Synesis company³⁴.

Another constant motive for anarchist activity was to provide practical guidance to protesters. The most popular seems to be the formation of the so-called Human Link (Sceпка, Сцепка), which makes it difficult to tear the ranks of the protesters apart³⁵. There were also calls for action in small groups, the creation of material and technical facilities, the development of conspiracy and maintaining security, which was to be necessary for the victory of the revolution. According to anarchists, resistance groups³⁶ should gain experience in night guerrilla actions (painting graffiti or putting up posters and banners)³⁷. Finally, there were also appeals to take control of public space³⁸.

Anarchists have always embraced all methods and forms of protest³⁹, also never rejecting radicalism⁴⁰. They openly appealed for the protesters to break the law,

³¹ И. Олиневич, Каратели и караевщина, "YouTube" [online], 20.09.2020 [Доступ: 01.05.2021]: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTYa-XEgIQo>>.

³² Почему нынешний лозунг о замене ополчения народной самообороной?, "Revolucionnoe Dejstvie" [online], 21 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/2020/08/pochemu-aktualen-lozung-o-zamene-militsii-narodnoj-samooboronoj/>>.

³³ Саботаж камер наружного видеонаблюдения, "Революционное действие" [online], 29 IX 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/2020/09/sabotazh-kamer-naruzhnogo-nablyudeniya/>>.

³⁴ Белорусский режим строит в стране систему тотального видеонаблюдения с помощью Kipod, "Pramen" [online], 17 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/belaruskij-rezhim-stroit-sistemu-totalnogo-video-kontrolya-v-strane/>>; М. Dziadok, А nikogo ne ubival, а tol'ko podaval patrony, "Facebook" [online], 17 X 2020 [1 V 2021]: <<https://www.facebook.com/happymikola/posts/1320431718307850>>.

³⁵ Сцепка: инструкция для протестующих, "You Tube" [online], 24 VI 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZXqP9Bh4QA>>.

³⁶ Группы сопротивления (обновление), "Revolucionnoe Dejstvie" [online], 25 II 2021 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://revbel.org/2021/02/gruppy-soprotivleniya-obnovlennye/>>.

³⁷ Децентрализованные протесты тормозят машину репрессий, "Pramen" [online], 29 XI 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/11/detsentralizovannye-protesty-tormozyat-repressivnuyu-mashinu/>>.

³⁸ Протесту нужно место!, "Pramen" [online], 25 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/protestu-nuzhno-mesto-o-neobhodimosti-fizicheskikh-prostranstv-dlya-samoorganizatsii/>>.

³⁹ Важны все тактики протеста!, "Pramen" [online], 14 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/vazhny-vse-taktiki-protesta/>>.

explaining the appeal with the total lack of respect for the law by the authorities⁴¹. “[...] we believe - they wrote - that in relation to the dogs of the regime, who are responsible for the beating, torture, rape and killing of our brothers and sisters, violence is permissible”⁴². This is the only way they believe it is possible to stop state violence. In mid-October, however, in a critical analysis of the weakening protests, they stated that in the face of gigantic repressions against Belarusians, it may be too late for radicalization⁴³.

It should be emphatically emphasized that Belarusian activists, unlike a number of sections of insurgent anarchism in Europe, have always emphasized their pro-social orientation (by addressing the issues of ecology, taxes, workers’ rights or repressions)⁴⁴, and their actions have never gone beyond the destruction of property⁴⁵.

The activists from the capital city actively supported the protests of various social groups, including students. They hung up banners, called for meetings with university authorities to be ignored and distributed leaflets about the struggle for their autonomy⁴⁶. They were also actively involved in the rapidly gaining popularity backyard initiatives, especially in the capital. The famous slogan “Power for the backyards!” that appears at the demonstrations added popularity

⁴⁰ 30 методов борьбы с диктатурой, “Pramien” [online], 21 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/08/30-metodov-borby-s-diktaturoj/>>.

⁴¹ Можно ли протестующий нарушить закон?, “Pramien” [online], 5 IX 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/09/mozhno-li-protestuyushhemu-narushat-zakon/>>.

⁴² Анархизм и насилие в Беларуси, “Pramien” [online], 20 XI 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/11/anarhizm-i-nasilie-v-belarusi>>.

⁴³ Критический обзор протестов последних двух месяцев, “Pramien” [online], 17 X 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/10/kriticheskij-obzor-protestov-poslednih-dvuh-mesyatsev/>>.

⁴⁴ The leaflet *Рабочие спасают Беларусь* issued by the *Promień* group called for joining a general strike and creating independent trade unions. The cooperative Leaflet (*Листовка*) was actively involved in the printing of workers’ appeals for strike committees. However, its activity ended with persecution by the authorities.

⁴⁵ J. Tomasiewicz, “*Partyzanci przyjemności*”. Insurekcjonizm: anarchizm wobec kryzysu czy kryzys anarchizmu?, [w:] *Europa XX–XXI wieku. Społeczno-polityczne konsekwencje kryzysów*, red. M. Gruszczyk, L. Krzyżanowski, M. Skrzypek, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2017, s. 355–377.

⁴⁶ Университет принадлежит нам, *Promień*, ulotka, listopad 2020, w zbiorach autora.

to anarchists⁴⁷, and in their opinion, backyard committees became a glaring form of self-organization and a good tool to fight the dictatorship⁴⁸.

We should also mention here that Marfa Rabkova and Andrei Čepiuk, who are associated with the anarchist movement and are currently imprisoned, collaborated with the “Viasna” Human Rights Defending Center⁴⁹. Another noteworthy activity is the activity of informal anarcho-feminist groups, which, with their own banners condemning the dictatorship and patriarchy, regularly participated in larger demonstrations, uniting with LGBTQI + activists and the general women’s movement⁵⁰.

In the result of anarchists’ theoretical work two political agendas were developed. The first, by the Pramien group, is called a transitional agenda and it has the features of a radical social-democratic program, postulating, among others: progressive income tax, the imperative mandate of parliamentarians (MPs), reduction of military expenses and of the budget, election of heads of regional departments of internal affairs, election of judges for a four-year term of office, increasing unemployment benefits, opening of the KGB archives, withdrawal of tax benefits for the Orthodox Church⁵¹.

The second, developed by Ihar Alinievich, is a bit more radical, and its points include: complete vetting of “Lukashenko’s gang”, the establishment of a committee for the rehabilitation of political prisoners and their total amnesty, geopolitical neutrality, introducing direct democracy with a system of transparent electronic coordination at the level of courtyards, districts and cities, establishment of the Belarusian Confederation of Cities and Regions, handing over to cities the management of state-owned enterprises, with each employee becoming their shareholders, establishment of the Economic Council, which would include representatives of all sectors of the economy, cities and expert circles, coexistence on equal terms of private property, cooperatives and syndicates, creation of

⁴⁷ Вся власть дворам, Promień, ulotka, listopad 2020, w zbiorach autora.

⁴⁸ Самоорганизация – единственный ответ диктатуре!, “Прамeнь” [online], 14 IX 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/09/samoorganizatsiya-edinstvennyj-otvet-diktature/>>.

⁴⁹ Правозащитники требуют прекратить уголовное преследование волонтера «Весны» Андрея Чечука, “Pravaabaroncy centr »Vasna«” [online], 13 X 2020 [accessed: 20 VIII 2021]: <<https://spring96.org/ru/news/99932>>.

⁵⁰ «Это наш город»: репортаж с крупнейшего женского марша в Беларуси, “Moloko Plus” [online], 29 VIII 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <https://moloko.plus/jive_women>.

⁵¹ Предложение программе-минимуме на время восстания в Беларуси, “Pramen” [online], 15 IX 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2020]: <<https://pramen.io/ru/2020/09/predlozhenie-programmy-minimum-na-vremya-vosstaniya-v-belarusi/>>.

a deflationary cryptocurrency, developing crowdfunding projects with the support of the Belarusian diaspora that would replace international loans, elimination of banks' monopoly on payment transactions, foreign companies are prohibited from holding more than 10 percent of shares in Belarusian enterprises, a ban on enterprises possessing over 25 percent of shares in other companies, development of small agriculture on a par with voluntary cooperatives, common armament of citizens, as in Switzerland⁵².

Perhaps for the first time in the modern history of Belarus, the anarchist movement has presented its own political programs, which is a momentous event for its supporters.

Repressions

The arrests and torture of anarchist activists began even before the elections⁵³. For years, being repressed on a regular basis (mostly by the General Directorate for Combating Crime and Corruption), they changed their addresses. On November 11th, 2020, Miłoła Dziadok⁵⁴ was extremely brutally arrested and charged under three articles of the Penal Code, if pleaded guilty, he may be imprisoned for many years.

On January 29, 2021, the Ministry of the Interior Affairs announced that an investigation was initiated against four people for belonging to the international criminal group Revolutionary Action, sponsored by, among others by Anarchist Black Cross. On March 5th, the Ministry of the Interior Affairs announced that another six members of the same group were detained in Brest⁵⁵.

The repressions against anarchists were accompanied by a media campaign. The higher command of the Ministry of Internal Affairs spoke out about them on

⁵² I. Olinevič, Програма анархизма для Беларусі, "You Tube" [online], 7 X 2020 [accessed 1 V 2020]: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEeUGLzzkpQ>>.

⁵³ Начаюсь превентивное задержание анархистов, "Anarhičeskij čěrnyj krest Belarus" [online], 6 VIII 2020 [accessed: 20 VIII 2021]: <<https://abc-belarus.org/?p=12943>>.

⁵⁴ Анархист Дедок задержан милицией. Дает показания и рассказывает. Панорама, "You Tube" [online], 12 XI 2020 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0uLg_A-UUw>.

⁵⁵ по делу о массовых беспорядках в Минске радикальных анархистов задержали, "Beltele-radiokompaniâ" [online], 29 I 2021 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <https://www.tvr.by/news/obshchestvo/po_delu_o_massovykh_besporiyadkakh_v_minske_zaderzhany_radikalnye_anarkhisty/>; Задержаны брестские анархисты из международной преступной организации, "You Tube" [online], 9 III 2021 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MwLNdHpWc>>.

a regular basis, and the head of the KGB, Ivan Tertel, accused the anarcho-partisans of plans to murder peaceful citizens⁵⁶.

On February 12th, 2021, the anarchist partisans were put by the KGB on the official list of terrorists⁵⁷.

Overall, the repressions ranging from several days of detention to many years' imprisonment affected dozens of activists of the anarchist movement⁵⁸.

Conclusions

Without a sufficient human and material base, anarchists did not manage to create a mass revolutionary movement in Belarus. Although they attempted to actively participate in the protests, these were all kinds of uncoordinated actions by separate groups – from peaceful demonstrations to guerrilla warfare. They tried to impose a strategy to fight the regime and through their own actions to activate and radicalize the protests, but they also adapted to the dynamics of events to an equal extent. Being a relatively effective tool in the fight against the current political system (thanks to the tactics of decentralization of protests, grassroots self-organization, lack of leaders or conspiracies), anarchism also tried to propose a positive political program. The popularity of the “Human link” (сцепка) and the increase in the number of people following the blog of the Pramien group or of the Mikola Dziadok to over ten thousand can be considered a media success. It seems that an important achievement of the Belarusian libertarian movement was also breaking the stereotypes of anarchism embedded in the society and the simple ignorance of it during the revolution. Nevertheless, like all other political options in the country, anarchism has failed to offer an exhaustive and – most importantly – in tune with the general public's moods response to the overall problems of contemporary Belarus. By being, paradoxically, the only organized political force on the streets of Belarus, the anarchists have exposed themselves to the authorities. As a result of errors in discreetness and conspiracy and the maximum concentration of the special services' attention to every aspect of

⁵⁶ Председатель Комитета государственной безопасности Иван Тертель, “Belarus” [online], 11 II 2021 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <https://www.belarus.by/ru/press-center/photo/predsedatel-komiteta-gosudarstvennoj-bezopasnosti-ivan-tertel_i_0000038979.html>.

⁵⁷ Перечень организаций и лиц, причастных к террористической деятельности, “Komitet gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus” [online], 12 II 2021 [accessed: 1 V 2021]: <<http://www.kgb.gov.by/ru/perechen-inf-ru/>>. Zob. również: E. Posłuszna, *Terroryzm anarchiistyczny – istota, taktyka, organizacja*, “Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe” 2013, nr 4, s. 99–120.

⁵⁸ Рубрика: Арестованы и заключены в тюрьму Беларуси, “Anarhičeskij černyj krest Belarus” [online], 8 VIII 2020 [accessed: 20 VIII 2021]: <<https://abc-belarus.org/?cat=3>>.

anarchist activity, they suffered a wave of repressions. Virtually all legal initiatives have expired, and some activists joined the wave of emigrants flowing mainly towards Poland and Ukraine. Thus, the Belarusan anarchist movement was de facto paralyzed as a result of its involvement in the revolution. According to human rights defenders, as of August 23rd, 2021, there were 637 political prisoners in Belarusan prisons, including at least a dozen anarchists, not counting anarchist partisans who do not fall into this category⁵⁹. At the same time, the following questions come up naturally: Does the nation have the right to rise in the conditions in which Belarusan society finds itself? Is the fight against the dictatorship with arms in hand moral and justified? Involvement in helping repressed people with different views, attempts to cooperate with various social groups (such as workers, students or human rights defenders), information activities in social media, and above all, the ideological nature and sacrifice displayed by anarchists during the protests, at least for some time created fertile ground to build their social capital. It can be assumed that the relative increase in the popularity of anarchists resulting from their contribution to the revolution and including some activists among the political prisoners will enable this group to strengthen its position in civil society that is forming in Belarus in the future.

⁵⁹ 637 человек беспринципно находятся в тюрьме, "Pravaabarončy centr »Vâsna«" [online], 23 VIII 2021 [accessed: 23 VIII 2021]: <<https://prisoners.spring96.org/be#list>>.

Chapter B

Repression and suppression of the wave of protests in 2020: a new institutional reality

Human rights in Belarus under the conditions of the public-political crisis in 2020–2021: the scale of infringements and impunity is unprecedented; repressions continue

Elena Konvalle

This article is a short review of the data contained in public documents of human rights defending organizations, which characterize the volume of infringements of human rights in Belarus during 2020 and 2021. This review is based on the materials of the Human Rights Defending Center “Viasna” [“Spring”], the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), the Belarusian PEN Center, the Center for Legal Transformation (Lawtrend), and the Belarusian Students Association (BSA).

At the moment of the preparation of this review, all human rights defending organizations, which during many years consistently carried out their activity aimed at protection human rights, improvement of legislative conditions, and advancement of international standards of human rights, have been liquidated compulsorily in Belarus. The majority of human rights defenders have left the country for reasons of safety. Seven employees of the Human Rights Defending Center “Viasna” are in prison: chairman Aleś Bialacki, vice-president Valancin Stafanovič, lawyer Uładzimir Łabkovič, coordinator of the Volunteer Service Marfa Rabkova, head of the Homiel Branch Leanid Sudalenka, volunteers Taćciana Łasica and Andrei Čapiuk.

2020: the suppression of civic protests and the system crisis of the implementation of civil and political rights and freedoms

Belarus' presidential election passed against the backdrop of the constant and systematic pressure upon the participants of the election process: members of initiative groups, the persons who were candidates, bloggers, political activists, journalists, and independent observers. The disagreement with the official results of the election led to the mass actions of citizens in Minsk and other cities of Belarus.

Despite the peaceful character of the rallies, since the first days there were mass detentions of citizens with disproportionate application of force, special means, special equipment, and weapons. As a result of the actions of siloviki (law enforcement officers), hundreds of people were wounded and mutilated; at least two demonstrators were killed; one arrested person died because he received no medical aid; thousands of detained participants of the protests in Minsk and other cities of the country were tortured and/or received other kinds of cruel, brutal, and degrading treatment.

By the end of 2020, the HRDC "Spring" documented more than 1,000 proofs from victims of the tortures. Despite citizens' mass appeals to investigate the tortures, investigations did not lead to the restoration of citizens' infringed rights; moreover – arrests and other forms of pressure were applied against those who appealed to investigate. The impunity and purposeful anonymity of employees of power structures generated a deep credibility gap between citizens and law enforcement bodies, which later resulted in new facts of infringements. Investigation organs never initiated criminal cases on the facts of deaths of A. Taraikoŭski, H. Šutaŭ, A. Vichor, and R. Bandarenka.

Detentions and arrests of the participants of the peaceful protests in 2020 received a mass character. Since the beginning of the election campaign in May 2020 and until the end of the year, more than 33,000 citizens were detained; the overwhelming majority of the arrested was found guilty by courts and received administrative arrests and large penalties. The Volunteer Service of the HRDC "Spring" collected data about 26,579 detentions in 46 settlements of Belarus for this period. Among the arrested: 20% – women, 171 persons – minors, 57 persons – foreigners. Some participants of the mass actions received long terms of arrests (two and more months). The prosecution of participants of the peaceful rallies is not limited to administrative punishment. Many of them were fired from their jobs or expelled from educational institutions. The independent student organization BSA collected data about 399 detained students and 131 facts of dismissals

from educational institutions for dissidence; the BSA leaders are being persecuted criminally.

Infringements of fair assize standards concerning participants of the peaceful rallies received a mass character and are presented in detail in the report “Belarus, August 2020: «justice» for protesters” prepared by the Human Rights Defending Center “Spring” and experts of the Belarusian House of Human Rights with the support of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organization Against Tortures.

According to the official data of the General Procurator’s Office, during the post-election period, criminal cases have been started against more than 900 citizens. By the end of 2020, 169 persons were recognized political prisoners by the Belarusian human rights defending community. According to the BAJ, 9 journalists were in custody as suspected or accused of criminal cases, 477 journalists were detained, 97 received administrative arrests. 18 members of the HRDC “Spring” within a year were exposed to repressions in various forms, including detentions and administrative arrests. According to the Belarusian PEN, there were 593 cases of infringements of human rights concerning art workers (employees of theaters, musicians, writers, artists, photographers, managers of culture), 15 art workers were recognized political prisoners.

Representatives of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches condemned the acts of violence, which subsequently became the reason of applying repressions against and pressure upon several religious figures and priests. Thus, the Head of the Roman Catholic Church archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz was actually expelled from the country and managed to return to Belarus in December 2020 only after the Vatican’s diplomatic intervention; the General Prosecutor’s Office made its official warnings addressed to the General Vicar of the Minsk-Mahiloŭ Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus bishop Juryi Kasabucki and the chairman of the Synod Information Department of the Byelorussian Orthodox Church Sergei Lepin.

It is necessary to separately mention that a criminal case (Article №357 of the Criminal Code «Conspiracy and other actions aimed at overthrowing the government») was launched, being based on the facts of activity of the Coordination Council, a public body created for the purpose of negotiations in order to solve the political crisis. Participants of the Coordination Council were subjected to searches, arrests, withdrawal of equipment and other property.

In 2020, the Ministry of Justice strengthened its control over lawyers who rendered legal aid to political prisoners: on October 16th the lawyers J. Pylčanka and

J. Levančuk were deprived of their licenses. The lawyer L. Kazak was detained and contained in the detention center of the Municipal Department of Internal Affairs of the Minsk City Executive Committee; later she received administrative responsibility and was fined. The lawyer Maksim Znak was in a detention center on politically grounded charges; the lawyer Illa Salei was under house arrest; both of them rendered legal aid to Victor Babariko's staff. Besides direct pressure, lawyers inform on essential difficulties while they try to render their legal aid, which receives a character of a constant practice.

In connection with the mass and systematic infringements of human rights, the OSCE Moscow Mechanism was launched in regard to Belarus again; a resolution of the UN Human Rights Council was accepted; UN special rapporteurs regularly speak of the critical infringements of civil and political rights and freedoms, using their powers and the possibilities of their mandates.

2021: the suppression of the dissidence and the freezing of the crisis

The presidential election in Belarus in August 2020, the mass protests that followed it, and the massive campaign of politically grounded persecutions defined the tendencies of 2021: never-ending detentions, searches, arrests, neglected standards of incarceration conditions, destruction of the independent press, governmentalization of the institution of legal profession, liquidation of noncommercial organizations, dismissals and expulsions of dissentients from the country. The political repressions of the year 2021 are the most mass ones during the period Belarus' independence and attest a deep crisis in the field of human rights.

As of January, 1st, 2022, in Belarus, 969 people were recognized political prisoners.

According to the Human Rights Defending Center "Spring", in 2021, in Belarus: not less than 1,285 people were condemned on politically grounded criminal cases; not less than 6,443 people were arrested, and not less than 3,060 official penalties, out of which: 2,186 – administrative arrests and 836 – administrative penalties. Almost 5,000 appeals, including more than 100 appeals from minors, asking to investigate and bring to account those guilty of tortures, cruel, brutal, and degrading treatment and punishment, were submitted to investigating bodies, including 680 statements on tortures in pre-trial detention centers in Minsk, but it did not lead to the restoration of the broken rights and freedoms of citizens; executors are not put to justice.

Members of the Presidium of the Coordination Council: Maksim Znak is sentenced to 10, Maria Kolesnikova – to 11 years of imprisonment in a corrective colony. Both have been accused of conspiracy aimed at overthrowing the government, public appeals to overthrow the government, creation of an extremist formation. On December 14th, the sentence of court was announced and the punishments in the form of imprisonment were appointed to: Sergei Tikhanovsky – 18 years, Mikalaï Statkievič – 14 years, Ihar Łosik – 15 years, Źmicier Papoŭ – 16, Arciom Sakaŭ – 16 years, Uładzimir Cyhanovič – 15 years. The sentence of the political prisoner Eduard Palčys is 13 years of imprisonment.

The head of the Homiel branch of the HRDC “Spring” Leanid Sudalenka and the volunteer Taćciana Łasica are condemned to three and two and a half years of imprisonment in a corrective colony. In a pre-trial detention center, on various charges, there are: the coordinator of the Volunteer Service of the HRDC “Spring” Maria (Marfa) Rabkova, the chairman of “Spring” Aleś Bialacki, the councilor of the organization Valancin Stafanovič, the lawyer and coordinator of the campaign «Human rights defenders for free elections» Uładzimir Łabkovič, and the volunteer of the organization Andreï Čapiuk. Criminal cases were launched against the Head of the «Office on the rights of people with disabilities» Siarhieï Drazdoŭski and the lawyer of the organization Aleh Hrableŭski; they were, accordingly, under house arrest and in a pre-trial detention center within more than three months. After their preventive punishments were changed, they were compelled to leave Belarus under the threat of their further imprisonment. In total, concerning human rights defenders, there were not less than 86 searches; equipment was withdrawn; offices were sealed up; human rights defenders underwent not less than 146 interrogations.

According to the BAJ, at the end of 2021, 32 journalists and employees of the mass media were deprived of freedom; 113 journalists were detained; they had 29 administrative arrests; during this year there were 146 searches.

According to the data of the monitoring of the Belarusian PEN, in 2021: 1,455 infringements of human rights concerning art workers. 63 art workers were recognized political prisoners, and 62 art workers received criminal liability. Dissenters are still being fired from state-run cultural establishments.

Within a year more than 30 lawyers were deprived of the right to carry out their lawyer activity, among them: lawyers Ludmiła Kazak, Kanstancin Michiel, Maksim Konan, Michajil Kiryluk, Siarhieï Zikracki, Uładzimir Sazančuk, Volha Barančyk, Barys Laskoŭski, Uładzisłaŭ Filipovič, Siarhieï Pičucha, Andreï Bartaševič, Alena Šynkarevič, Mikalaï Jotka, Hanna Vaŭčynskaia, Šviatlana Chałałovič,

Michajil Badnarčuk, Andrei Mačalaŭ, Žmicier Łajeŭski, Anton Hašynski, Kaciaryna Žaŭtanoha, Volha Karpušonak, Jaŭhienij Mašloŭ, Julija Kniaź, Andrei Cialehin, Natalla Mackievič, Jaŭhienij Pylčanka, Iryna Varankova, Ihar Pietraševič, Alaksiei Kieral, Žmicier Łazavik, Siarhiei Ivanoŭ, Natalla Alaksieieva, Natalla Vancovič, Elizavieta Maćvieieva.

The year 2021 became a year of the liquidation of civil society's organizational structures. On July 14th, employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Financial Investigations Department carried out searches at the offices of several parties and public associations, human rights defenders and politicians. In particular – in the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Movement «For Freedom», the HTDC “Spring”, the Center for Legal Transformation (Lawtrend), Human Constanta. In total, in July, it became known about more than 40 NGOs where there had been searches.

On the request of the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Court passed a decision to liquidate the Belarusian PEN Center, the Belarusian Organization of Journalists, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the human rights initiative “Link”. It became known about tens of decisions on the liquidation of NGOs registered by the Minsk City Executive Committee. Among them: the charitable project “Names”, «Press Club Belarus», human rights defending organizations Human Constanta, Lawtrend, Office on the rights of people with disabilities», as well as the Belarusian National Youth Council, European Studies Center, European Expertise and Communication Office. According to the Center for Legal Transformation (Lawtrend) [<https://www.lawtrend.org/liquidation-nko>], not less than 304 NGOs were closed by the authorities in 2021; and other not less than 190 NGOs made a decision on their self-dissolution under the pressure of registering bodies.

Instead of the conclusions

The public-political crisis in Belarus has generated mass infringements of human rights and freedoms. The repressions do not abate; no normalization of the situation in the short term or intermediate term period is possible. Only time will show when, under what conditions, and how the process of normalization of the situation with human rights in Belarus begins. Anyway, the last two years have thrown us so far back in the past that it is difficult to predict how much time and forces it will take us to restore, at least, the minimum trust to the state institutions of law, order, and justice (let alone respect, observance and guarantees of the rights and freedoms in the way they are understood by the basic international documents of the United Nations and the international obligations).

“Cleanup-2021”: a wave of liquidation of non-governmental organizations in Belarus

Yuri Orlovsky

In the second half of 2021, the number of registered non-profit organizations in Belarus dropped sharply. This happened both as a result of the forced dissolution of organizations by a court decision on the claim of the justice authorities or a non-judicial decision of the registering local authority, and by the decision of the organizations themselves on the formal voluntary dissolution of the organization. From a legal point of view, the grounds and procedure for forced liquidations could be very different, but their simultaneousness and the extremely rapid, explosive nature of this wave of liquidations indicate that we are dealing with a pre-planned and sanctioned by the country’s political leadership campaign to delegate the institutional component of the civil society of Belarus.

Within just a few months, almost five hundred NGOs of various forms were deprived of their legal status¹, including those which were iconic for the Belarusian civil society. Among others, such opinion-making and long-standing organizations as the Belarusian PEN Center, the Human Rights Belarusian Helsinki Committee and the Legal Initiative, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Association of Belarusians of the World “Batskaushchyna”, the Union of Belarusian Writers, the Belarusian Language Society named after Francysk Skaryna, the Public Association “The Lev Sapieha Foundation”, the Public Association of the Belarusian Popular Front “Revival” (“Adradzhenne”), the Movement “For Free-

¹ Hereinafter, quantitative data on the current situation are provided as of December 18, 2021, unless otherwise indicated.

dom”, the Association “Tell the Truth” and many other public associations. this is the largest “cleanup” of the civilian sector in the recent history of Belarus.

The total number of forcibly liquidated organizations is more than three hundred NGOs of various forms, and if we add to this about two hundred NGOs, which during these months in extremely unfavorable conditions for activity made formally voluntary decisions on self-liquidation (both on their own initiative and on the informal recommendation of the authorities), it becomes clear that we are witnessing the largest “cleansing” of the civil sector in the modern history of Belarus. In general, the sector is losing more than 10% of existing NGOs and will return to the level of the mid-2000s in terms of numbers (2,500 public associations). It is noteworthy that in 2020 the number of public associations managed to exceed 3,000 organizations.

The 2021 public sector clean-up is not the first campaign of its kind. Belarusian public associations twice underwent large-scale re-registrations: in 1994, in connection with the entry into force of the special Law “On Public Associations” (then the re-registration of organizations took place without much loss), but in 1999, the next re-registration caused significant quantitative damage to the sector.² Just over half of the 2,502 non-governmental organizations remain. According to statistics from the Ministry of Justice, 1,537 associations applied to the registration authorities. 211 associations were denied re-registration. The organizations themselves were able to organize in 1999 a joint SOS-Third Sector campaign to provide legal support in the re-registration process, which became a sector solidarity campaign.

In 2003-2004, the public sector faced a challenge similar to the current lightning-fast campaign to delegate NGOs: in the spring of 2003 a liquidation campaign swept in with the intention of shutting down the organizations most active during the September 2001 presidential election campaign. The most influential regional organizations, several human rights structures and youth movements, as well as resource centers were targeted. The rapidly started wave of liquidations gradually lost its original momentum and subsided by 2005-2006. Although it led to the closure on October 28, 2003, the Public Association Human Rights Center “Viasna”³, the Independent Society for Legal Research, the public association

² The right to unite Belarus 1994-2004 (Minsk, 2004) – p. 11 (Право на объединение Беларуси 1994-2004 (Минск, 2004) – с. 11 http://kamunikat.org/usie_knihi.html?pubid=21252

³ Review-Chronicle of Human Rights Violations in Belarus in 2003 (Human Rights Center “Viasna”) Review (Обзор-Хроника нарушений прав человека в Беларуси в 2003 году (Правозащитный центр «Вясна») Обзор- https://spring96.org/files/reviews/ru/2003_review_ru.pdf

“Legal Assistance to the Population”, the Hrodna Resource Centre “Ratusha”, the Brest Resource Center “Vezha”, the Homiel Resource Centre “Civil Initiatives”, and soon the most reputable agency for conducting opinion polls, the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI). The total number of forced liquidations amounted to 157 public organizations and at least 110 organizations decided to liquidate on their own initiative in 2003-2005. Organizations managed to organize the campaign “Our Solidarity”⁴ deploying a system of collective legal protection for NGOs. In general, it cannot be said that the cleanup was directed entirely against the NGO sector. Many organizations did not notice this campaign, and even occupied the vacant niches in the market of social activities.

How is Cleanup-2021 different from previous NGO delegalization campaigns?

It is clear that the 2021 purge, like the previous public sector delegalization campaign in 2003, has political reasons. This political aspect is now not particularly hidden during the campaign – on the contrary, now the state media and bloggers in every possible way emphasize the political nature of the destruction of non-profit organizations, and the start of the campaign was announced by the Minister of Foreign Affairs in April 2021 and by the publicly acting president, interpreted precisely as a punitive action against political opponents of the current regime, which was later repeatedly confirmed by him.

We can state a number of specific features of the NGO liquidation campaign in 2021:

- **The mass** character and scale of the liquidation campaign exceeds the indicators of the 1999 re-registration campaign, while affecting the most prominent and reputable organizations.
- **Comprehensive nature:** the blow was dealt to organizations of a different nature and direction of activity, including both organizations with a pro-democracy position and neutral associations, and even structures that were considered loyal to the authorities.

⁴ Кіраўнікі больш за 20 беларускіх грамадзкіх арганізацыяў – актывісты кампаніі “НАША САЛІДАРНАСЬЦЬ” падпісалі Зварот да парлямэнтарыяў замежных краінаў <https://spring96.org/be/news/539>

- **Geographic coverage:** both public associations of the republican level and local organizations in all regions of the country and in the city of Minsk were affected.
- **Organizations of different legal forms are affected:** public associations, institutions, foundations, unions (associations) of legal entities.
- **This is the reason for the variability of ways to liquidate NGOs.** Accordingly, this variability led **to the involvement of a large number of state bodies in the process of liquidating NCOs** – not only the traditional Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for general issues of registration of legal entities, but also regional departments of justice, departments for registering legal entities of regional executive committees, district executive committees, district administrations in cities, tax control divisions, prosecutor’s offices, courts, various services of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and, of course, courts.
- **The grounds for the liquidation of NGOs were extremely diverse** and also varied depending on which body was the real initiator of the liquidation.
- **The combination of the forced liquidation mechanism with recommendations for organizations to decide on voluntary liquidation on their own initiative** is also something new in Belarusian law enforcement practice.
- **There were liquidated both new and numerous iconic organizations that have existed for decades**, including those created in Soviet times and even earlier. For example, the Society of the Belarusian Language and the Public Association of the Belarusian Popular Front “Adradzhenne” were established in 1988 in Soviet Belarus, the Union of Belarusian Writers was established in 1933 in the Stalin era, and the Society of the Belarusian School traces its history from an organization that existed in Western Belarus as part of Poland in the interwar period one hundred years ago, from 1921. But institutions which were registered just recently in 2021, as well as political movements, whose registration was once perceived as a political concession to democratic forces, were also subject of the purge – the public associations Movement For Freedom (“Za Svabodu”) and Tell the Truth (“Govori Pravdu”).
- **Speed and simultaneity:** over 50 searches in the offices and homes of human rights defenders, leaders and activists took place in Belarus on July 14, 20 people (including Viasna human rights activists) were detained or taken for interrogation. The searches were carried out in the human rights center “Viasna”, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Association of Belarusians of the World “Batskaushchyna”, in the office of the non-profit charitable platform “Names” (“Imena”), in the Center for Economic Research BERO, in

the offices of the Belarusian Popular Front Party and the United Civil Party, in the Center for Legal Transformation Lawtrend and other non-profit organizations. And already on July 22, local executive committees decided to liquidate the first 12 institutions: the charitable project “Names”, the journalistic workshop “Press Club”, the human rights center Human Constanta, the center for the development of effective communication “Living Library”, the “Center for Legal Transformation” (Lawtrend), “Center for Environmental Solutions”, “Office of European Expertise and Communications”, institutions “Territory of Rights”, “TimeAct” and “European Dialogue”, Novopolotsk Center “InitsiArt”. By the end of July 2021, almost two hundred NGOs have already faced the launch of the process of their involuntary liquidation.

- **The combination of legal liquidation of NGOs and other forms of repression** against civil society, arrests, searches, confiscation of equipment and information banks, and sealing of offices is also a feature that gives the 2021 campaign a completely different character.
- In connection with the above, **many NGOs made independent decisions on voluntary liquidation on their own initiative**. This was due not only to the impossibility for the activities of many organizations, but also to the toxicity of the very status of a registered organization. But at the same time, in many cases, the decision on “voluntary liquidation” was taken by organizations after the persistent recommendations of state bodies.
- Characteristically, **the forced liquidation campaign did not mean the suspension of the process of registration of new organizations**. And while in relation to public associations, new organizations close to state power were mainly registered (sports associations, organizations with a clear political line to support the current government), in the case of institutions, independent new NGOs were also registered.

Legal note: which organizations and on which basis were liquidated

Thus, during the cleanup-2021, the authorities used the previously existing strict rules that allow state agencies to almost arbitrarily liquidate any NGO. In some cases, this could be done administratively in one day, as in the case of liquidation of institutions, in others, a mandatory trial was required with the possibility of an appeal, which allowed local public organizations to delay the process for several months and even up to six months of the process from receiving a claim for liquidation to the entry into force of the decision on the liquidation of the orga-

nization. However, the outcome of this process did not depend on procedural circumstances and was predetermined by the political decision to include the organization in the list of NGOs that were subject to dissolution and deprivation of legal status. While the current wave of liquidations, as in 2003, is clearly linked to revenge after the presidential election campaign, it differs in scale. In general, the sector is losing more than 10% of existing NGOs and will return to the level of the mid-2000s in quantitative terms (2.5 thousand public associations, or a little more).

In fact, the cleanup of the public sector began back in December 2020, when the Pinsk institution Polesska Dobrota was deregistered by the decision of the registration authority. Then, this experience of forced liquidations in the first half of 2021 spread to other NGOs in Brest and Hrodna: through a lawsuit in the economic court, the Center for City Life institution in Hrodna was liquidated; by the decision of the local administrations of Brest on June 14, the Wings of the Kholop institution and the Cultural and Educational institution “Soil of the future” were shut.

In June 2021, the first alarming signals appeared that the liquidation could concern public associations: two public associations were liquidated – the “Strategy” Analytical Center and the Belarusian Association of Women Lawyers. These organizations have not filed statutory annual returns for more than three years, which could be grounds for a lawsuit by the Department of Justice to liquidate the organization⁵. However, earlier the Ministry of Justice treated such violations more mildly and never used such a harsh measure as liquidation. In parallel, in May-June 2021, the Ministry of Justice and regional departments of justice demanded from a number of NGOs a huge package of documents on dozens of points over several years⁶.

⁵ Law of the Republic of Belarus “On Public Associations”, art. 29 (Закон Республики Беларусь «Об общественных объединениях», ст. 29 <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=v19403254>

⁶ *Fishing expedition* is a metaphor that characterizes procedural tactics in civil proceedings: requesting from the opposite side a large number of documents that are loosely related to the original case, in the expectation that either these documents will reveal any facts that will allow the plaintiff to change the claims, or the costs of the opponent for the preparation of documents will be unbearable. In the case of Belarus, a number of NGOs, faced with this tactic, decided to refuse to provide documents (especially if they were in offices sealed by the investigation during the searches on July 14-15, 2021 or were seized as part of other criminal investigations), including in order to avoid to provide repressive authorities with additional information which could potentially become the basis for persecuting people (for example, lists of members or data on donors of the organization).

At the same time, the initiators of the forced liquidation of institutions were not particularly concerned about the legality of their actions: in Minsk, a number of institutions were first sent for liquidation for not carrying out entrepreneurial activities – although this ground for liquidation applies only to commercial organizations⁷.

Regarding four human rights institutions, the prosecutor's office issued a special press release, emphasizing that the liquidation was initiated by the prosecutor's office. It concerns a consulting center on current international practices and their implementation in law "Human Constanta", the Center for the Promotion of Women's Rights, the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities and the Center for Legal Transformation. As the reason for their liquidation it was stated that their activities did not meet the goals and subject specified in their charters.⁸

In some cases, organizations were given written warnings. a written warning could be appealed in a separate process, which was used by the organization "Zerno", the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the movement "For Freedom", the Belarusian Language Association, the Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhenne", the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the public association "Ekodom" and several other organizations.

In addition, several organizations, even before liquidation, faced the suspension of the organization's activities for several months to eliminate shortcomings (a measure applied to the human rights organization "Legal Initiative", to the Movement "For Freedom", to the youth association "Liberal Club" and a number of other public associations). And although the suspension of activities is also a procedure carried out by the courts, later the Ministry of Justice still filed liquidation suits against these organizations and they were closed by the courts.

At least 484 non-profit organizations were affected in the liquidation process. Among the organizations which were liquidated as of December 18, 2021, there are public associations (121 liquidation claims are known, another 105 public associations decided to liquidate of their own free will), foundations (liquidated in court – 14 cases when such claims were filed and 9 cases when claims were filed by the founders themselves), institutions (162 liquidations by decision of the

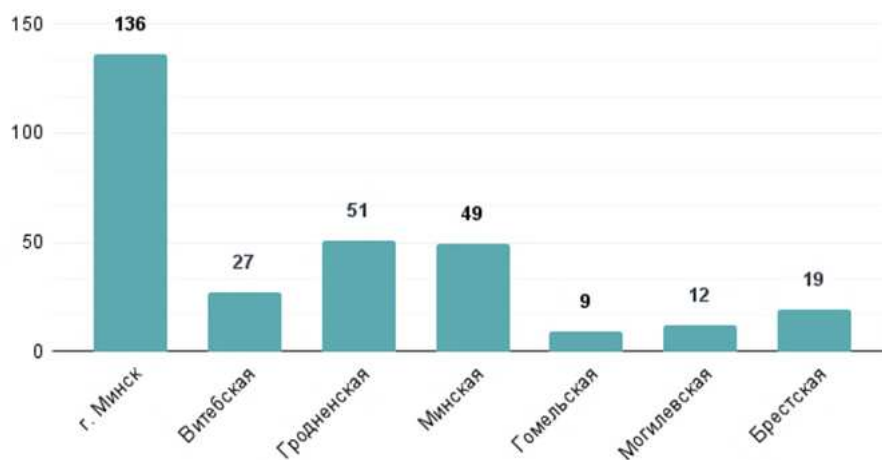
⁷ Асцярожны аптымізм: ці спыняць падаткавікі паляванне на некамерцыйныя арганізацыі? <https://zautra.by/news/news-25915>

⁸ In Minsk, according to the prosecutor's office, four institutions were liquidated (В Минске по представлению прокуратуры ликвидированы четыре учреждения <https://www.belta.by/society/view/v-minske-po-predstavlenijam-prokuratury-likvidirovany-chetyre-uchrezhdenija-453574-2021/>)

court or the registering authority and 67 liquidations at the initiative of the founders), associations (unions)) of legal entities (6 liquidations are known, all at the initiative of the registering authority).

In the regional dimension, all regions of the country were affected, although the share of Minsk prevails due to the disproportionate development of the sector: the majority of international and republican NGOs in Belarus are registered in the capital. It is noteworthy that there are still very few liquidations in the Homiel region, although there are many public organizations in the region (including those associated with the Chernobyl problem).

Regional dimension of forced liquidation (public associations, foundations, institutions and associations of legal entities)⁹



In general, the most common grounds for liquidation are:

- failure to submit or improper submission of reports to the registration authority;
- incomplete or untimely submission of documents requested from the organization during total checks in May-July (including regarding its local branches);
- claims against the registered office regarding confirmation of the legal address of the organization or its local organizational structures;
- non-elimination of violations that served as the basis for issuing a written warning or suspension of the organization's activities;

⁹ According to Lawtrend and the Office of European Expertise and Communication, source: <https://bit.ly/3xwxuKk>

- in a number of cases, cooperation with unregistered umbrella structures that are associations of civil society organizations was recognized as the basis for liquidation: the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, the Assembly of Democratic Non-Governmental Organizations, the Rada of Youth and Children's Public Associations (although all these structures are registered as legal entities outside Belarus).

This group of grounds for liquidation can be called “ordinary” – although in the previous few years these grounds for liquidation were used extremely rarely, but in general they were enshrined in legislation and their application did not come as a surprise in the context of the unfolding wave of repression.

But there were also claims for liquidation with several specific justifications, including three groups of grounds for liquidation, which are unusual in Belarusian case law:

The first group: letters or statements from law enforcement agencies that a public association is engaged in extremist or other illegal activities. statements by law enforcement agencies were unreasonably accepted as irrefutable evidence in the case of the liquidation of the organization – the courts did not consider the question of whether the organization is engaged in extremist activities, but took the unsubstantiated letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs as evidence.

In Minsk, a number of lawsuits against NGOs were based on letters from law enforcement agencies while the content of the claims and the reasons why the organization's activities were considered extremist remained unknown or were kept secret during the preliminary investigation (the defense in the liquidation case did not have access to these documents in court). The courts satisfied such claims, thus recognizing excerpts from criminal cases that have not yet been considered by the courts as sufficient evidence for the liquidation of organizations in civil proceedings. There are cases when the reason for the liquidation was that the organization signed a statement recognizing the Coordinating Council of the opposition as the legitimate representative of the Belarusian people (for example, the “Post” Educational Center published such a statement on Facebook).

The second group of unusual circumstances for deregistration of organizations is associated with mass inspections of organizations by registration authorities. Supporting the legal liquidation of NGOs with criminal cases against their leaders and activists for participating in protests (real or imagined) is another feature of this new NGO delegalization campaign. other structures included in the power block of power committed more cruel actions against civil society. For example, on July 14, a raid was carried out in the offices and apartments of the leaders of

dozens of organizations, accompanied by arrests and seizure of documents and media. At the same time, the offices of the organizations were sealed and access to them was prohibited – so the organizations did not have access to the premises – place of storage of the documents required by the Ministry of Justice, and during the consideration of claims for liquidation and by the judiciary.

It is noteworthy that in a number of cases, the reason for the liquidation of public associations was the non-publication of financial statements, which was introduced in 2021 for the first time in accordance with the amended version of the law on combating the financing of terrorism in May 2020. Moreover, even if the required reports were published or submitted to the Ministry of Justice, the authorities still tried to find inaccuracies in them in order to include such a basis in the list of requirements sufficient to eliminate influential and authoritative organizations.

For example, in relation to the Belarusian Language Society, the essence of the claims was that the report was submitted to the Ministry of Justice, but it was not accompanied by a request to publish it on the website of the Ministry, although such a request is not mandatory according to the decision of the Ministry itself. This ground for liquidation in connection with the legislation on the prevention of financing of terrorism was also faced by the Society of the Belarusian School and the Association of Belarusians of the World “Batskaushchyna”, as well as other organizations.

Consequences of the campaign of liquidation NGOs and prospects for the Belarusian third sector

Against the backdrop of widespread and comprehensive repression, the liquidation of NGOs does not seem to the general public to be the most egregious practice, the same concerns the international community. A developed and stable civil society is incompatible with the political and legal regime established in Belarus as a result of the events of 2020-2021. Thus, the purge of NGOs looks like a correction of the discrepancy between the regime of “soft authoritarianism and the social contract between the people and the authorities”, when civil society structures were tolerant of the regime and could continue to exist and even influence political processes, as it was in 2011-2020.

In any case, the Belarusian civil society will never be the same as it was in the last thirty years of independence. The wave of liquidation affected not only new organizations which had worked during protests in 2020, but also the oldest institutes of civil society. The very preservation of the legal political opposition,

the legal independent socio-political media and independent civil society organizations as such, turned out to be questionable.

Legal and independent NGOs that have survived in Belarus face challenges that are more serious and complex than those concern organizations which have moved their center of activity abroad. Of course, the process of destruction of the non-governmental sector that unfolded in July-November 2021 was not so noticeable to the media and the general public, when about a thousand political prisoners were in custody, and thousands more citizens were defendants in criminal cases for participating in protests. Also activists of the Association of Belarusan Students, by the start of the campaign to liquidate NGOs, had already been sentenced to imprisonment, but at the same time, many journalists, activists of local communities, leaders of strike committees and ordinary participants in peaceful protests were awaiting sentencing. The previously detained heads of the Press Club and the Office for the Rights of the Disabled were released from custody after several months.

In connection with the NGO liquidation campaign, the criminal case against the leaders and employees of the Viasna Human Rights Center, who were accused of tax evasion and financing of actions grossly violating public order (including by paying lawyers for persons detained during protests in the summer and in the fall of 2020 after the presidential elections). Leaders of the Viasna Human Rights Center Ales Bialatsky, Valentin Stefanovich and Vladimir Labkovich were in custody pending trial, a number of employees and activists of the organization were forced to leave the country for fear of repressions¹⁰.

The international community condemned the repression and human rights violations, including hostile actions by the authorities against the Polish minority and Polish schools in the country, and the European Parliament called for the immediate and unconditional release of the leader of the Union of Poles, Angelika Borys, journalist Andrzej Pochobut and other political prisoners.

¹⁰ According to the prosecution, V. Stefanovich A. Belyatsky, W. Labkovich, D. Solovyov and other persons on the territory of Belarus and abroad, after the liquidation by the decision of the Supreme Court of October 28, 2003 of the human rights organization "Viasna", continued the activities of this organization on the territory of Belarus, including the performance of works (services), for which the above organization paid remuneration in the amount of at least 879,887 rubles to persons who performed work (provided services) in the period from 2013 to 2020. In violation of the norms of the Civil and Tax Codes, they did not register the organization as a legal entity and a taxpayer, thereby concealing from the tax authorities information about the payments made and evading income tax payable to the budget by a tax agent by concealing the tax base for the period from 2013 to 2020 in a total amount of at least 113,428 rubles. – according to the HRC "Viasna" <https://spring96.org/ru/news/105681>

Although, of course, the personnel pool for NGO structures for the revolution (or rather, for post-revolutionary protests and the formation of structures of the “new opposition” abroad) really could become, but not to a greater extent than the official diplomatic corps and law enforcement agencies, which also recruited “new opposition” abroad, including the Coordinating Council and organizations such as ByPol.

Nevertheless, some conclusions about the state of civil society in Belarus in the coming years can be drawn already now, regardless of the legal status.

First, it is obvious that the role of GONGO and those structures that were created by the authorities instead of independent public organizations will increase. The Union of Journalists will deliberately replace the functions previously performed by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the regime has its own Union of Writers and other similar associations. The Belarusian Republican Youth Union will follow youth initiatives more closely

Secondly, the influence of Belarusian diaspora organizations and those NGOs whose leaders have left and transferred most of their activities abroad will increase. In the free world, these structures will have more opportunities to attract donor funds and crowdfunding, to freely express their own thoughts and proposals, to implement projects and to influence Belarusian society through foreign-based media. And if earlier Belarusian NGOs sometimes transferred abroad only certain functions and services that could not be performed within Belarus (a vivid example is the Belarusian House of Human Rights of Boris Zvozkov in Vilnius), and the decision-making center itself remained in Belarus, now it is a question of the relocation of organizations. Their key managers were forced to relocate abroad. The relocation of the decision-making center abroad with a corresponding change in the optics of activities, the distortion of the assessment of risks and responsibilities, as well as the connection with the foreign agenda in the new home countries take place.

Thirdly, both registered NGOs and illegal public structures operating underground or semi-underground remain in the country. The regime deliberately pushes the latter group abroad or presents them in the same ranks as terrorist groups. Whether this trend of civil society will be able to withstand this test and continue educational, propaganda, charitable, social and human rights activities, regardless of the authorities, is an open question. The issue of preserving at least some legal basis and lawful legal status will be crucial for the mass and sustainable existence of independent civil society organizations.

Legal frameworks of activity of Belarusian noncommercial organizations¹ (according to the monitoring results)

prepared by Lawtrend

General conditions

Article №36 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus secures freedom of associations (the right to association) for everyone, except for the right to membership in political parties and public associations pursuing political ends for judges; public prosecution officers; employees of law-enforcement bodies, of the State Control Committee, and of security services; and military men. Article №23 of the Constitution presupposes that the restriction of people's rights and freedoms is allowed only in the cases specified by the law, in the interests of national safety; public order; protection of morals, of health of the population, and of rights and freedoms of other persons. According to Article №22 of the Constitution, everybody is equal before the law and has the right without any discrimination to have equal protection of rights and legitimate interests. These articles create a constitutional-legal basis, provide the implementation of freedom of associations at the national level and, as a whole, correspond to the international standards in the field.

The Republic of Belarus also joined a number of international documents guaranteeing freedom of associations. In particular, the International Pact of Civil and Political Rights (Article №22), the International Pact of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Article №8). Article №8 of the Constitution says that the

¹ In this article, we review such organizational-legal forms of noncommercial organizations as public associations, unions (associations), establishments, and foundations.

Republic of Belarus recognizes the priority of the universally acknowledged principles of international law and demands to provide the conformity of the Belarusian legislation to these principles.

At the same time, laws and bylaws accepted in elaboration of the constitutional norms on freedom of associations, as well as the existing law-enforcement practice in Belarus, unreasonably and essentially limit the implementation of this right. Throughout many years, the implementation of freedom of associations causes constant criticism on the part of Belarusian human rights defenders, international bodies and organizations, e.g. within the framework of the procedure of the Universal Periodic Review. The UN Human Rights Committee repeatedly accepted its conclusions concerning the infringements of freedom of associations by Belarus. However, Belarus ignores the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee, which were accepted in connection with individual appeals.

The basic legal restrictions on the creation and activity of noncommercial organizations (NGOs) in Belarus are:

- Interdiction of activity of non-registered organizations, as well as the responsibility for the organization and participation in such an activity;
- A difficult and burdensome procedure of registering public associations, their organizational structures, unions (associations) of public associations, as well as the foundations; there is always a possibility to refuse registration of any unwanted organization;
- Limited access to external and internal financing; access to state financing only for a limited circle of pro-state noncommercial organizations; the system of individual indirect support, including tax privileges and preferences;
- Excessively overstated requirements to annual public reports of public associations and foundations;
- The essentially limited right of NGOs to freedom of peaceful meetings, freedom of speech and freedom of expressing opinions, including the application of norms of the legislation on extremism;
- The wide grounds to liquidate NGOs, allowing the authorities to liquidate any noncommercial organization. Thus, establishments can be liquidated extrajudicially, and decisions of courts concerning Belarusian and international public associations and foundations cannot be appealed².

² In 2021, in Belarus, the mass compulsory liquidation of public associations, foundations, establishments, and unions (associations) was launched. There are numerous facts when NGOs were forced to make a decision on their liquidation.

Creation and registration of noncommercial organizations

The procedure of registering public associations and foundations, established by the Belarusian legislation, is extremely difficult, expensive, long, and contains a very wide list of grounds to refuse registration. Establishments and associations of legal bodies (except for associations of public associations) have a declarative order of registration, which is established for commercial organizations. However, the procedure of coordinating the name, which is obligatory before any registration, becomes a barrier to register unwanted establishments and associations. Due to the diffuseness of legislation in this sphere, in practice it is possible to refuse the coordination of the name of any created organization.

The legislation contains too high requirements to the quantity of founders (members) of public associations: the creation and activity of a Belarusian public association requires not less than 50 founders (members), a local public association – not less than 10 founders (members). The state tax on the registration of establishments and associations of legal bodies is insignificant; however, that of public associations and foundations is 10 times bigger than the registration of a commercial organization. A wide list of grounds to refuse registration of a public association or a foundation makes it possible to refuse the registration of any public association or foundation unwanted by the authorities even due to an insignificant technical reason (e.g. a slip of the pen in the address of the residence of one of founders; a mobile phone number instead of a home phone number). The creation of any NGO requires the presence of the legal address. The NGO legal address can only be in an uninhabited premise and cannot be the same as the residence address of physical persons, including founders or members of this organization.

Interdiction of activity of non-registered organizations

Since 1999, in Belarus, in contradiction with the international standards in this area, activity of non-registered organizations is forbidden. From 2005 to July 2019, in Belarus, there was criminal liability for one's participation in and the organization of activity of a non-registered organization (Criminal Code, Article №193¹). During the existence of this Article in the Criminal Code, not less than 18 persons were sentenced for their participation in activity of non-registered organizations; tens of others received official warnings from the public prosecution office.

Since July 2019, criminal liability for the organization and participation in activity of a non-registered organization was replaced with administrative liability. Howe-

ver, already on January, 4th, 2022, Law of the Republic of Belarus №144–3 “About changes in the Codes” was accepted; it came into force on January, 22nd, 2022 and returned in the criminal legislation the responsibility for the organization and participation in non-registered organizations (Article №193¹). It concerns the organization and participation in non-registered public associations, including political parties and trade unions, religious organizations, as well as foundations.

Interference in activity of noncommercial organizations

Article №6 of the Law of the Republic of Belarus forbids the intervention of state structures and officials in activity of public associations, except for the cases specified by the legislation. However, in practice, such interference occurs both at the stage of the creation of NGOs and at the stage of their activity. Thus, Article 194 of the Criminal Code says that any hindrance to the lawful activity of public associations or intervention in their lawful activity, which entailed the essential infringement of their rights and legitimate interests, are punished by fines or the deprivation of the right to occupy certain posts, or to be engaged in certain activity, or up to 2 years of corrective labor. However, no cases of applying these articles in practice are known.

Many public associations and foundations are compelled to correct their Statute purposes while submitting their documents to registration according to recommendations of registering bodies, being afraid of refusal in registration. Numerous cases of infringements of the right to privacy of NGOs are known: searches in the locations of organizations and in places of residence of their management, members, employees, volunteers; wiretapping of telephone conversations; hacking of e-mail addresses; blocking of Internet resources; supervising bodies ask to submit the internal documentation of organizations, etc. Thus, there were numerous searches in NGOs in the second half of 2020–2021. Besides pinpoint searches, there were unprecedented mass searches in offices of NGOs and physical persons affiliated with them. On February, 16th, 2021, searches touched Belarusian human rights defending organizations. According to the information of the Investigation Committee³, all across the country there were not less than 90 searches. On July, 14–16th, 2021, there was a second wave of searches in civil society organizations of most different orientation of activity, their management, members, and employees. During searches in NGOs, their employees and members, all equipment, communication means, documentation, personal things

³ Telegram channel of the Investigation Committee of Belarus // <https://t.me/skgovby/3945>

and money were confiscated. Many NGOs were never explained on what grounds and why these searches occurred; no search protocols were presented. Also, there were facts of interventions in activity of NGOs during the carrying-out of checks by bodies of financial control and justice, when they inquired the information on their activity. The biggest number of checks concerned public associations and foundations in May-August 2021. Checks, inquiries of information touched both international and Belarusan, and local public associations and foundations of various orientations. Thus, judicial authorities requested a large quantity of documents from public associations and foundations, which considerably exceeds the competence of judicial authorities and is per se the excessive intervention in internal affairs of NGOs. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the legislation does not regulate checks of public associations/foundations and registering bodies' inquiries of information: there is no standard regulation of the procedure of checks, terms of their carrying out, terms of inquiry of information, etc.

Public reports of public associations and foundations

In 2020, into the Belarusan legislation in elaboration of the norms of the Law of the Republic of Belarus «About measures to prevent the legalization of incomes received by a criminal way, the financing of terrorist activity, and the financing of the distribution of weapons of mass destruction», the requirement to present public reports by public associations was introduced. NGOs' publications of reports on their activity are recognized positive practice at the international level. However, in the Belarusan variant, these reports, first, contain excessive requirements to the information that public associations must publish and submit to judicial authorities. Second, the presence of such public reporting is not grounded in the legislation of the country, which rigidly limits access of a wide range of NGOs to financing and does not practically provide privileges and preferences for them. Third, under the conditions of the political crisis that developed in Belarus, public reporting has become an additional factor of pressure upon civil society organizations. Since 2022, the requirements to public reports of public associations and foundations have been widened even more. It now must contain all actions/events carried out by organizations during a year, purposes and contents of these actions/events, as well as their participants, including bloggers, journalists, and moderators of communities in social networks.

Unequal conditions

The Belarusian legislation discriminates some NGOs in comparison with others, creating favorable conditions for a very limited circle of organizations. First of all, such discrimination is observed in the sphere of granting direct state support, when direct state financing is given to a very limited circle of NGOs. However, unequal conditions are created for NGOs while granting indirect support, too. Thus, Decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus №761 (came into force on March, 30th, 2022) was passed on December, 27th, 2021⁴; it considerably reduced the list of organizations having rent privileges. It says that only 23 Belarusian NGOs can have these privileges (prior to it, the privileges were given to 103 NGOs; when this decision was accepted in 2010 – about 500 NGOs had them; and before the introduction of the list – all public associations had the right to have the privileges). Favorable conditions are created for members of some pro-state NGOs, for example, the Belarusian National Union of Youth (BRSM). At the same time, Article №190 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus defines that the establishment of direct or indirect advantages for citizens, depending on their belonging to public associations, is a penal act.

Prosecution of members of noncommercial organizations

Various articles of the Administrative Offenses Code are used to persecute members of NGOs: first of all – Article №24.23 (Infringement of the order of the organization or the carrying-out of mass actions) and №24.3 (Disobedience to the lawful order or the requirement of the official while he executes his official powers). Since 2020, the practice of starting criminal cases against members of both registered and non-registered organizations started to be applied for the first time: the Coordination Council, Association of Belarusian Students, Office on the rights of people with physical disabilities, Human rights defending center “Viasna” [“Spring”], Press Club, the Union of Poles, SYMPA, “Radzislava”, etc. According to the criminal legislation and the practice of its application, a variety of Articles of the Criminal Code, first of all – those concerning extremist activity, can be applied against the management and members of organizations (Article №361¹ – Creation of an extremist formation or participation in it; №361² – Financing of extremist activity; №361⁴ – Assistance to extremist activity; №361⁵ –

⁴ The list of noncommercial organizations that have rent privileges in Belarus has been changed // <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/izmenyaetsya-perechen-nekommercheskih-organizatsij-imeyushhih-v-belarusi-lgoty-po-uplate-arendnoj-platy-a-takzhe-podhody-k-predostavleniyu-takih-lgot>

Training or other preparation for participation in extremist activity); Tax Laws (№243 – tax evasion; №243¹ – evasion from performing the duties of a fiscal agent to pay taxes); Legislation on mass actions/events (№369³ – public appeals to organize or to carry out illegal meetings, rallies, street processions, demonstrations or picketing or the involvement of persons to participate in such mass actions).

In 2020, a number of statutory acts were accepted – they contain very general and wide formulations concerning the concepts described in the legislation on extremist activity (“extremism”, «an extremist organization», «an extremist formation»). Such an approach leads to the situation when an ordinary activity of an NGO – e.g. the carrying-out of researches, situation monitoring in Belarus, writing of articles, alternative reports, information distribution, educational activity, rendering of free-of-charge aid, etc. – can be recognized “to be beyond the frameworks of the law” and considered to be “extremist activity”.

The media sector and the situation of journalists and the press

Izabela Nogawica

According to the Ministry of Information data as of July 1st, 2021, there were 1,619 printed mass media periodic issues in Belarus (433 state owned and 1,186 non-state owned), also 262 electronic media (181 state owned and 81 non-state owned), and 9 information agencies (2 state and 7 non-state owned)¹. Based on these data alone, one can see how the non-state owned media are enormously outnumbered comparing to the state (traditional) electronic media. This is also confirmed by the research conducted by the BAJ, which shows that the most important source of information for Belarusians is television (36%), and only then the Internet (26%) and radio (24%). Only 6% of the population reads the printed press on a regular basis.² Most of the independent media in Belarus are not officially registered as “mass media” (this status is granted by the Ministry of Information), which prevents journalists from attending official events. From the legal point of view, journalists of unregistered media are not journalists, i.e. they do not have the protected status and may be detained as participants when reporting on the protest.

In June 2018, a new bill on the mass media was presented in Belarus. The control of the authorities was extended to the Internet media, which from then on were obliged to identify all authors of comments and entries on the sites. In December of the same year, the compulsory registration of the websites as media was extended, and that is a complicated procedure. Pages not registered as media are deprived of all rights related to the media status. In May 2021, Lukashenko signed an amendment to the media law, which prohibits foreign ownership and prohibits the publication of polls. The prosecutor’s office restricts access to portals on

¹ <http://mininform.gov.by/>, accessed: 15.07.2021

² https://baj.by/sites/default/files/event/files/2020/report_media2020_rus.pdf

which “information is disseminated with the aim of promoting extremist activity or other information that may harm national interests”. This means not only extending the scope of responsibility on the above mentioned content, the publication of which is punishable by punishment, but also a ban on sharing links to information deemed to be extremist.³ The media may be liquidated not only by court judgments, but also by a decision of the Ministry of Information.

Belarus was one of the few European countries that did not quarantine during the pandemic. The state-run media denied for a long time the existence of the coronavirus. Journalists were unable to obtain information on the epidemic in the country. During the Ministry of Health conference, journalists were not allowed to ask questions, and the information was limited to the publication of official announcements of the Ministry of Health. Over time, it was admitted that Covid exists and affects Belarus as well, but the official message focused on reporting a large number of ventilators, recoveries and vacant intensive care beds. For the first time, Belarusians felt how much misinformation could endanger their health and life, as well as their loved ones. Therefore, reliable information was sought in private media.

The second reason for people to turn to independent media was the way state media reported on the ongoing presidential campaign. Partly due to the failure of the Lukashenko regime to deal with the pandemic, the 2020 election campaign stood out in terms of public engagement. The state media initially adopted a strategy of ignoring the topic of the election, but later, facing rather large public mobilization, they focused on discrediting the opposition candidates. The presidential candidates were criminalized in the state media. Sergei Tikhanovsky began being mentioned more often only after he was arrested and charged on May 29th, so he could be presented as a criminal.

Independent media gained importance for the second time with the arrests of Babariko and Tikhanovsky. It turned out that the information on the ongoing campaign is very popular. This tendency intensified after the election, when after the publication of the completely unreliable election results, people tried to understand what the real situation was. In response, protests on an unprecedented scale began. The combination of Lukashenko's failure to deal the pandemic combined with the election year led to more than two-fold independent media trust increase in and a four-fold decrease in the level of trust in public media⁴.

³ <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/artykuly/8171176,bialorus-lukaszenka-ustawa-zaostrenie-przepisow-o-mediach.html>

⁴ https://studium.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BWR_Raport_1.pdf

Although the situation of the media has been difficult since the beginning of Lukashenko's rule, in recent years journalists have been imprisoned quite rarely. Journalists were detained on a regular basis, but usually they had to visit a police station and to submit a statement, or in more severe cases they were given a fine or several days in arrest. This situation changed dramatically in 2020. According to the Justice for Journalists report, the number of attacks on journalists, bloggers and media-related professionals in general in 2020 significantly exceeded the number of such cases in 2017–2019.⁵ Since May, there were many more detentions and checks, and in July journalists covering protests were regularly detained for several hours. Since August, persecution of the media has become a key element of the strategy to combat the post-election crisis. During the protests, journalists not only got fines and were arrested, but were also traced down and caught by law enforcement officers. According to the BAJ data, in 2020, journalists in Belarus were detained by the police 477 times; 97 of them served prison terms; 15 had criminal charges. The summaries show that they spent a total of 1,200 days behind bars and received fines of approximately \$ 25,000. 62 journalists were injured. Access to news websites was blocked more than 50 times. In 2020, there were as many as 15 criminal cases against journalists.⁶ In the annual press freedom index, Belarus took 153 place in 2020 (out of 180 countries), at the beginning of 2021 the same organization recognized Belarus as the most dangerous country for journalists in Europe.

The most important element of the fight against the media were economic and legal mechanisms, most of all bans on printing newspapers and blocking websites, which, according to the Ministry of Information, were used to “coordinate mass disobedience to the authorities” or “discredit the activities of state organs”. Some media had to temporarily move their contents to social networks. Since the end of August, the Belarusian Press House refuses to print “Narodnaja Vola”, “Komsomolskaya Pravda”, “Svobodnye Novosti Plus” and “Belgazeta”. Their distribution was also refused by the state monopolists Belpochta and Belsoyuzpechat. Local newspapers, such as “Hazeta Slonimskaja” and “Hazeta Brestskaja”, experienced similar problems.

The next step was an attack on journalists' organizations, as well as media corporations and news agencies. In January 2020, the president of the Belarusian Press Club, Julija Sluckaja, and the program director, Alla Sharko, were detained. The official reason was tax evasion. The headquarters were searched, as well as

⁵ <https://jfi.fund/ru/report-2020-2/#bel>

⁶ <https://baj.by/ru/analytics/smi-v-belarusi-v-2020-godu>

the apartments of management. On February 16th, 2021, searches were carried out at the Belarusian Association of Journalists' headquarters. Police officers also searched the apartments of the chairman, Andrei Bastuniec and his deputy, Aleh Ahiejou. The investigative committee informed that proceedings had been initiated "in order to establish the circumstances of financing the protest action".⁷

TUT.by has been the most popular independent website in Belarus for years. Every day, on average, it was visited by over three million users. On September 18th, 2020, the Ministry of Information filed an application to the court to deprive TUT.by of a mass information center status. For the media portal's journalists this meant that there was no possibility of reporting on the protests. In 2020, Kaciaryna Barysievic from TUT.by faced criminal charges. Barysievic was punished for disclosing a medical secret because she informed that Raman Bandarenka, who was killed by Belarusian officials, was not drunk. In May 2021, the regime closed the agency. The editor-in-chief of the portal, Maryja Zolotava, was arrested, and other employees of TUT.by were also imprisoned.

The repression also hit the Belapan news agency. On January 12th, Andrei Aleksandrov went missing. It turned out that he was in custody. The journalist was accused of "gross violation of public order in Minsk". It was later reported that Aleksandrov was funding mass protests. Belapan's office was searched and equipment confiscated.

The last few years have seen a huge increase in the popularity of online media. First of all, access to the Internet is universal and cheap. In terms of information and communication infrastructure modernization, Belarus is not only the best among the CIS countries, but is also rated above the world average⁸. This phenomenon is described in more detail by Pauluk Bykouski in his article. During the 2020 election campaign, as well as in the period right after the election, access to the Internet was regularly blocked, especially during the hours when protests were to take place. From 9 to 12 August, the Internet in Belarus practically did not work. In order to track these limitations, the NGO Human Constanta initiated the Digital Observers project, in which volunteers monitored the availability of the network in various places around the country.

The internet blockade was circumvented in various ways. An example can be Belsat, to which it was possible to send a text message asking about the presence of someone on the list of detainees or any information, and the leaders checked the lists and provided information on a vision. The second way to bypass the

⁷ <https://baj.by/en/analytics/everything-was-done-paralyze-work-organization>

⁸ https://studium.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BWR_Raport_1.pdf

blockade turned out to be the return of so called “samizdat” (самиздат, self-publishing or underground publishing). Willing to engage in the dissemination of information, they could, while the Internet was working (usually in the morning), download the material in pdf format, e.g. from the Agitka 2020⁹ website, and then print it out and distribute it in person in the stairwells.

An important trend in the last few years, and above all in 2020, is the politicization of the media, especially the Internet. Particular attention should be paid to the Telegram messenger, which is a tool for both bloggers and journalists of blocked editorial offices to create media content and which allows them to create chats for the exchange of information at the local level, as well as self-organization of protests and assistance. In the case of Belarus, today there is even talk of a “Telegram universe” or “telegram media”¹⁰ On September 20th, 2020, the NEXTA channel was deemed as extremist by a court decision. In addition to Telegram, YouTube still plays an important role, allowing the creation of videoblogs, analytical podcasts and interviews (such as the “Bielarusy i Rynok” channel¹¹), and internet television (Malanka Media¹²).

Contrasting with the general depoliticization of Belarusan society, the media in 2020 showed much more courage in presenting political events than before. According to the monitoring carried out by the BAJ, independent media regularly informed about opposition candidates for the presidential office and their programs, election observations and social initiatives, as well as protests, detentions and arrests.¹³

The politicization of the media influences the politicization of Belarusan society. Research conducted by PACT¹⁴ shows that the low civic activity of Belarusians was largely due to their low knowledge of the political situation. The media played a big role in overcoming the fear of going out on the street. Thanks to the live coverage of the protests, many Belarusians could feel part of a wider opposition movement.

Another important phenomenon is the change of the attitude towards linguistic issues. In recent years, the decision to create media in Belarusan has been considered quite risky. For those parts of society influenced by the Russian domination, the Belarusan language was associated with nationalism. The year

⁹ <https://www.agitka2020.org/>

¹⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2020>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFwGK9959swQPQde8OYn0GA>

¹² https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5sPqti8bakMgz5T5u6_o6A

¹³ <https://baj.by/en/analytics/coverage-2020-presidential-elections-Belarusan-media-report-2>

¹⁴ https://www.pactworld.org/sites/default/files/Article_3_Shraibman_Social%20Activity_EN.pdf

2020 brought a national awakening and the Belarusian language became the language of the young generation. Although during the election campaign, politicians of the “new opposition” were cautious about demonstrating “Belarusanness”, during the post-election protests people spontaneously started to favor the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms. The Belarusian language has become the language of protest. A large part of the so-called new mass media that work via social networks are the channels run in Belarusian.

Blocked and exiled. The way the media field has changed in Belarus

Yanina Melnikava

The 2020–2021 events in Belarus have seriously affected all spheres of life. Perhaps, there is no longer such a branch of economy, no such collectives or communities left, which would remain outside of the political agenda, outside of the context of the protest movement and of the subsequent violence and repressions.

Despite all the efforts of the authorities, the Belarusians continue to receive the information on the developments in the country through social networks, Telegram channels, and independent authors' Youtube channels. Although today even to be a subscriber to them is quite unsafe. The independent media keep playing an important role in the distribution of the information agenda in Belarus, which is alternative to the state-run one. During these years, the overwhelming majority of them have been faced with unprecedented pressure on the part of the authorities; they lost their legal status, were compelled to partially or completely leave the country, etc.

The new media reality of today's Belarus looks as follows: to ply journalism inside the country is not just difficult, but life-threatening and perilous; to do it from abroad is less dangerous, but also difficult (there is a big risk of losing one's hold on Belarusian realities or of falling victim to purposeful disinformation).

COVID Spring

The 2020 winter was marked by a world-wide convulsion – the COVID-19 pandemic began. In the news agenda of the world media, the COVID-19 topic occupied the first places and stayed there for months. The virus frightened, puzzled, and made us feel anxious and perplexed.

COVID-19 came to Belarus and quickly occupied the front pages of the mass media, especially independent ones, too. While the state-run propaganda kept singing its traditional song «Everything is fine», the non-state media provided as much information as possible, which – at that point – was extremely difficult to do.

Stories of volunteers and self-organized citizens, who sew masks and PPE, who make hot dinners for physicians, who help the lonely and the disadvantaged, gushed into the pages of the independent mass media. They often and in detail told of small and medium business, housewives, IT specialists, taxi drivers, students, and doctors, who day and night contributed to the struggle against the virus.

All that created more confidential connections between the media and their readers/spectators and helped people cope with their anxiety; the media demonstrated that it was possible and necessary to act together in order to protect oneself and others as much as possible. Later, politologists will say that Lukashenko's attitude to the pandemic and his scornful words aimed at the first victims of the virus were his first serious error in his internal policy, which echoed in the hearts of not only his age-long opponents, but many supporters and undecided citizens as well.

Finally, by broadcasting such disdain for those who died, which is alien to the Slavs, the state-run propaganda achieved the opposite effect: people definitively ceased to pin their hopes on the authorities, clearly saw the way they were deceived by the state-run TV channels and press, and came to the idea of uniting for the sake of their own protection.

2020 Presidential Campaign

In the spring of 2020, the Belarusians had a clear understanding: «Nobody, but us». And this understanding had been formed, *inter alia*, by Belarusian independent journalists. The launched election campaign, which had traditionally appeared in the focus of not all independent media in Belarus, this time became one of the most discussed events not only in political editions.

Since May-June 2020, the topic of the forthcoming presidential election in the Belarusian independent mass media began to sound in a tonality half-forgotten in Belarus. If the previous elections had been reflected in the mass media as a «technical vote for Lukashenko», then this time it was “an important procedure registered in Belarusian legislation, which everyone who has the right to vote should

take part in”. Journalists of independent media (including regional editions that had traditionally presented agencies’ scanty information materials on elections) began to create their own political content: portraits of candidates, reports from staffs, reports on meetings with candidates in regions, etc. The degree of people’s interest in the political life of the country was increasing by leaps and bounds.

Nevertheless, perhaps no editions were prepared for the events that occurred in August 2020. For several days after the election, the work of the mass media looked like an attempt to beat their head against a wall: the Internet did not work, web-sites were blocked, messengers almost stopped working. However, the crackdown of peaceful demonstrators and the beating of people in police precincts and Okrestina hacked their way through to the media channels thanks to the work of journalists and active help of users. This help did not stop later – when the Internet was not blocked any more: even if journalists were not present at a place of an event, editions learned about this event within several minutes. Social networks and Telegram accounts of the mass media turned into teletype tapes, into infinite eyewitness accounts, which required no comments and explanatory notes.

Messengers and chat bots – where one can send his/her information to – became a new reality of the Belarusian independent mass media: their main products, channels to distribute and gather information.

Law-enforcement officers’ *idée fixe* was to remove journalists from the streets and to deprive them of any possibility to make videos, to stream, to contact their editions, and to transfer any information. Belarusian journalists were shot; they were preventively detained before the rallies; they received fines and “days” (administrative arrests) ostensibly for their participation in unsanctioned actions. The implementation by journalists of their professional duties was now equaled to their participation in unapproved rallies and later – to the organization of such actions (the case of Darja Čulcova and Kaciaryna Andrejeva became the early warning in this direction).

Belarus as a “hot spot”

Already by the autumn of 2020, it became clear that the mass media will no longer have any usual “peaceful” work. In the country with peaceful protests, there were no “safe” topics for work left. You write about culture – and you get in the field of politics, i.e. the protest field. You write about sports – and again: you are in protests. You write about art, education, science, history... This list could be continued endlessly.

The profession of the journalist in the country became extremely dangerous, and a “hot spot” (which many journalists-romanticists dream of working in) moved not just to your own city, your own courtyard, but frequently – to your own apartment.

Finally, the mass media had to admit that the socio-political agenda, which their audience needed and which they presented so professionally and comprehensively on their pages, on the Internet, and in their social networks, was a stake of a very high risk. As a matter of fact, independent journalists, having chosen the side of the unbiased coverage of the situation (and they had no other choice), staked everything: their business, their legal status, freedom of their colleagues, their personal and family comfort.

Relocation and distribution of forces

Already by the end of 2020, many journalists, editors, and editions began to think of their temporary relocation that became mass in 2021. It touched not only nation-wide editions, but also regional collectives that also happened to be objectionable in the eyes of the authorities; they were closed under different pretexts, deprived of their official status, and/or blocked. Journalists became figurants of criminal cases ostensibly for their appeals to a coup d'état, participation in unsanctioned protests, etc. Now, if you work in the Belarusian mass media, you could easily become an “extremist”, as they say, while you are just sitting in front of your computer. Separate channels of communication of media with their audiences and whole collectives were recognized as extremist, e.g. the news agency BelaPAN was not deprived of its legal status, but already recognized as extremist.

In this respect, the recognition of, for example, sports resources as extremist is especially indicative, in our opinion. Such as “Tribuna”. Before that, nobody could ever think that journalists specializing in sports events could be so “dangerous”, but 2020 turned everything upside down. And “Tribuna”, which gave the floor to the sportspeople who wanted to protect the country from the authorities' violence and arbitrariness, appeared among the first media recognized as extremist.

And, of course, even in the autumn of 2020, when the repressions against journalists were going at full tilt, nobody could ever imagine what would happen to the largest national portal of the country – TUT.by. In May 2021, law-enforcement officers came to the office of this edition and literally within one day they not simply destroyed it, not just detained its main editors, journalists, and managers, but also physically switched off the servers of TUT.by – thus depriving the

Belarusians of their twenty-year history that included the first e-mail addresses, the first notes at forums, and news.

Already in the beginning of June, the people from the team of the portal, who had not been arrested, – journalists and editors – presented the temporary project “Zerkalo” that is meant to substitute TUT.by until the moment when it is possible to revive it.

Fact-checking and a new editorial policy

The departure of a number of editorial collectives, the absence of the legal status of those who stayed in Belarus, and the incessant pressure upon the mass media required from media workers new skills, new competences, and the revision of their own editorial policy: up to the tone of voice (a tonality used by the mass media in their communication with the audience) that, of course, differs from the tonality in traditional channels – on web-sites and pages of printed editions. Journalists and editors quickly mastered new tools, including the old social networks.

Because of the repressions, the Belarusian independent media are now chaotically scattered up and down various platforms (from still working separate regional web-sites to messengers and social networks) and different countries. There are also editions in which a part of their collective is in the country and a part (it is often the majority of employees) is abroad – by the end of 2021 it ceased to be something outstanding. It is not a challenge any more, not an exception to the rules, but a way of the existence and preservation of the working capacity of the teams and their separate representatives.

The repressions made Belarusian independent journalists face the serious challenge that has to do with fact-checking. The question of checking the information received by editions is especially acute for the teams that relocated from Belarus. Having no «eyes and ears» in the country, it is more difficult for them to distinguish square reports from fakes disseminated by the state-run propaganda.

By the end of 2021, Belarusian independent journalism appeared in much more bigger, than earlier, dependence on the user content because its own ability to be present in the thick of things in the country is limited very much, including by reasons of safety of the journalists who have remained in the country. It has affected both quality of the content and its uniqueness: informers often share their materials with different channels simultaneously, and channels, without receiving the due quantity of news information, are compelled to regularly repost somebody else’s content. Thus, within 5–10 minutes one piece of news appears

literally in all Telegram channels, which makes them indistinguishable like identical twins.

Nowadays, we observe a crisis of news journalism, noticing that in the Belarusian mass media there appear more and more analytical materials, authors' original projects, and unique information products.

There is a problem with cadres in editions: on the one hand, it was expected that the closing of large editions would fill the market with professionals; on the other hand – many journalists burned out, decided to change their trade, remained in the country, but cannot find a job because the relocated editions do not want to jeopardize these people as they are in a vulnerable position.

However, even in this situation, the hearsays about the death of Belarusian journalism are exaggerated way too much. Yes, the majority of independent editions of socio-political (and not only) character are blocked, deprived of their legal status, their workers partially or completely were forced to leave the country, to hide their names and faces, but the social networks pages of these media, in the overwhelming majority, keep working. They keep filling the home market with news, analytics, important human stories, and launch new products. New channels of communication with the audience are being created; new technological possibilities are being used.

To remain with the Belarusians

Today's Belarusian media are re-building their strategies, reconsidering their distribution and communication channels, learning to find anew the common language with their audiences, and more than ever need support, both moral and material. Former business models are destroyed, and today it admits of no doubt that it makes no sense to speak about the Belarusian independent media's self-sufficiency. Those few of them, who started a system of donations, for example, through the platform Patreon, cannot achieve their audiences' serious financial support yet.

In the final analysis, today we see that Belarusian independent journalism, although it is experiencing an unprecedented professional crisis, nonetheless tries to adhere as much as possible to the professional standards, trying not to harm both colleagues and audiences. The majority of the media, which in the summer of 2020 intensively worked with the political agenda, has not departed from it, though they try to give various content to the audiences knackered of the repressions and pressure. Thus, many editions still cannot escape propaganda narratives, paying

a lot of attention to messages of Lukashenko's Press Service, for example. Time will only show whether they manage to build a new information strategy. However, as of today, it is absolutely obvious that despite the relocation, re-formatted work, and safety challenges, Belarusian journalists demonstrate not just their will to live, but their desire to live and work for Belarus and the Belarusians, no matter where they are present physically right now.



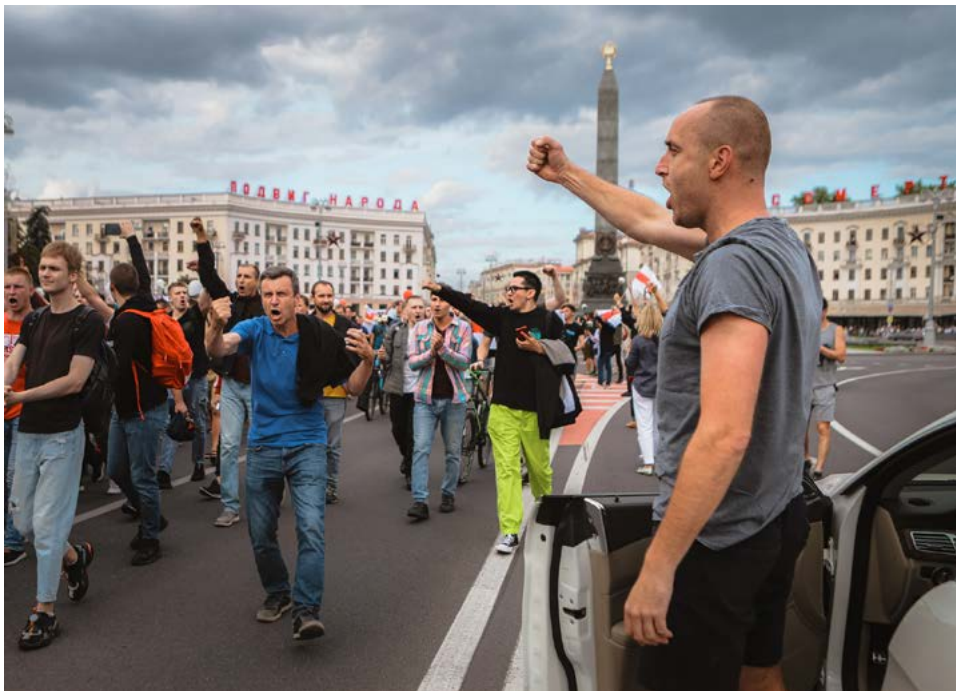
Svetlana Thikhanovskaya at a rally during the election campaign (Minsk, July 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



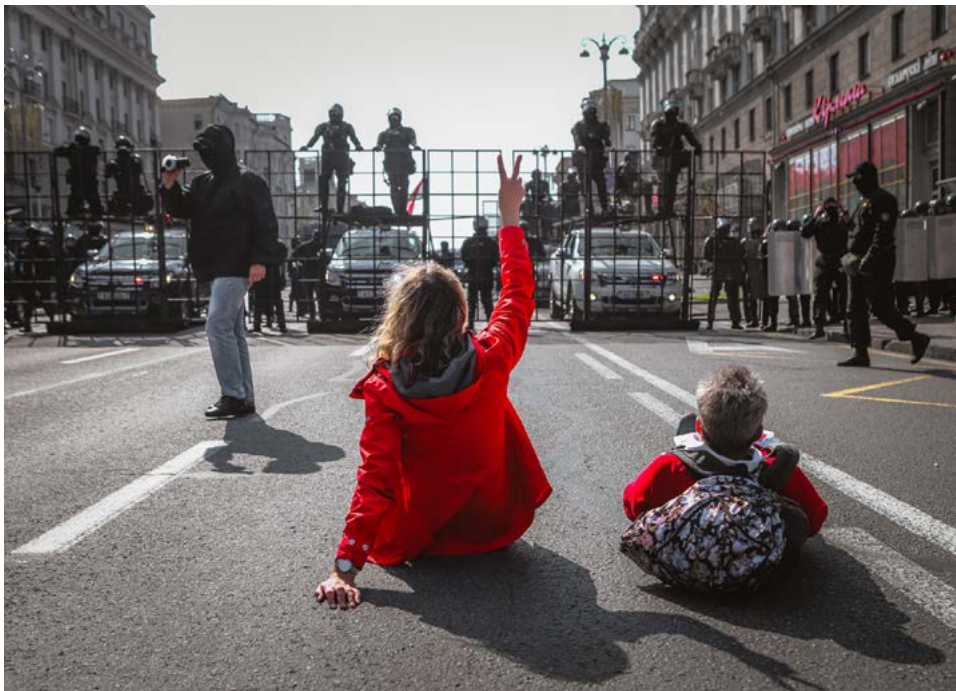
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Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



In front of entrance to The prison on Volodarka (Minsk - 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



Protests in Minsk (August–November 2020)



The March for Freedom (August 16th, 2020, Minsk)



Farewell of the activist Vitold Ashurak, who was killed in prison
(Biarozouka, May 26th, 2021)



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This collection of articles was meant initially to be a review of Belarusian civil society condition and development in the 2015–2020 – the period rather favorable both for the third sector and for the economic and social development of Belarus as a whole. Today, in 2022, it is obvious that neither Belarusian third sector, nor Belarus, nor Region as a whole will ever return to the former state of affairs. The events of 2020–2021 in Belarus and the war unleashed in February 2022 in Ukraine will one way or another lead to substantial changes, at least, in Europe. However, despite the global character of these changes, we consider it necessary to describe the processes, tendencies, and achievements that took place in Belarusian society and in the field of activity of public organizations during the previous period.

Therefore, the first part of this collection is dedicated to subjects, processes, and tendencies in the CSOs sphere in 2015–2020. Except the analysis of the development of public organizations and initiatives in the traditional logic of thematic lines of activity (ecology, social projects, culture, national minorities, etc.), in this section, we also tried to analyze some aspects and infrastructural processes that create new conditions for CSOs development. Besides, separate attention is paid to the development of CSOs in different areas of Belarus.



The second part of the collection is dedicated to the attempt of at least partially describing and comprehending the events of 2020–2021 per se – their preconditions, characteristic, and scales. The articles in this part can be rather debatable and even provocative, but we do hope that they will offer their mite not only to the fixation, but also to the understanding and interpretation of the intricate and antilogous processes of this period in Belarusian history