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Center for European Transformation
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Discussion Paper

The Belarusian Civil Society: dynamics of change in an unfriendly environment



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Introduction

Since the mid-2000s, the civil society has been an integral part of international and national development policies. A multi-stakeholder dialogue with the full participation of civil society as an actor in its own right is recognized as a necessary element for sustainable development, promotion of democracy, social justice and human rights.¹ This means, inter alia, that creating an enabling environment for the development of civil society and developing the civil society itself becomes part of sustainable development policies. A important number of international and national actors are engaged in such activities, including support for the development of civil society in Belarus. Such actors need evidence-based and case-study assessments of the state and development of civil society. And, most importantly, it is necessary that such assessments come not only from external observers, experts and academic institutions, but also from the civil society itself. This paper presents the results of a participatory study of civil society in Belarus, carried out on the initiative of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (BNP). The study is based on the expert opinions of participants from different sectors of civil society in Belarus, who not only acted as a source of data, but were actively involved in the process of programming the study and discussing its results. In this sense, one can say that the presented data is a self—report of the civil society of Belarus on the state of its own development over the last three years (2015-2017).

This paper summarizes data on 15 sectors of civil society in Belarus (see Chart 1), their most significant actors, the state of internal cooperation, problems, current trends and the most significant events; the state of inter-sectoral cooperation and cooperation of civil society organizations with the state; legal, financial, political and institutional conditions for civil society in Belarus. It is not possible to reflect in this short paper all the aspects included in the main report of the study, so its main focus will be on the most important features from the authors' point of view.²

Authors and the period of the study

The study was carried out by experts of the Center for European Transformation³ and the Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend)⁴ on the initiative of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (BNP)⁵ in the period: field stage — **February-July 2018**, data analysis and interpretation — **August-September 2018**.

¹ See: **Sustainable Development Goals 17**: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg17>; see also: *Alena Zuikova. Civil society in development policy: global trends and practices of the European Union* [in Russian], Working Paper, Center for European Transformation, 2013: http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/File/CS-DP_WD.pdf.

² Read the full report in Russian: https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/DOC/1/2018_Civil-Society-Belarus_RU.pdf.

³ **Center for European Transformation**, see: <https://cet.eurobelarus.info>.

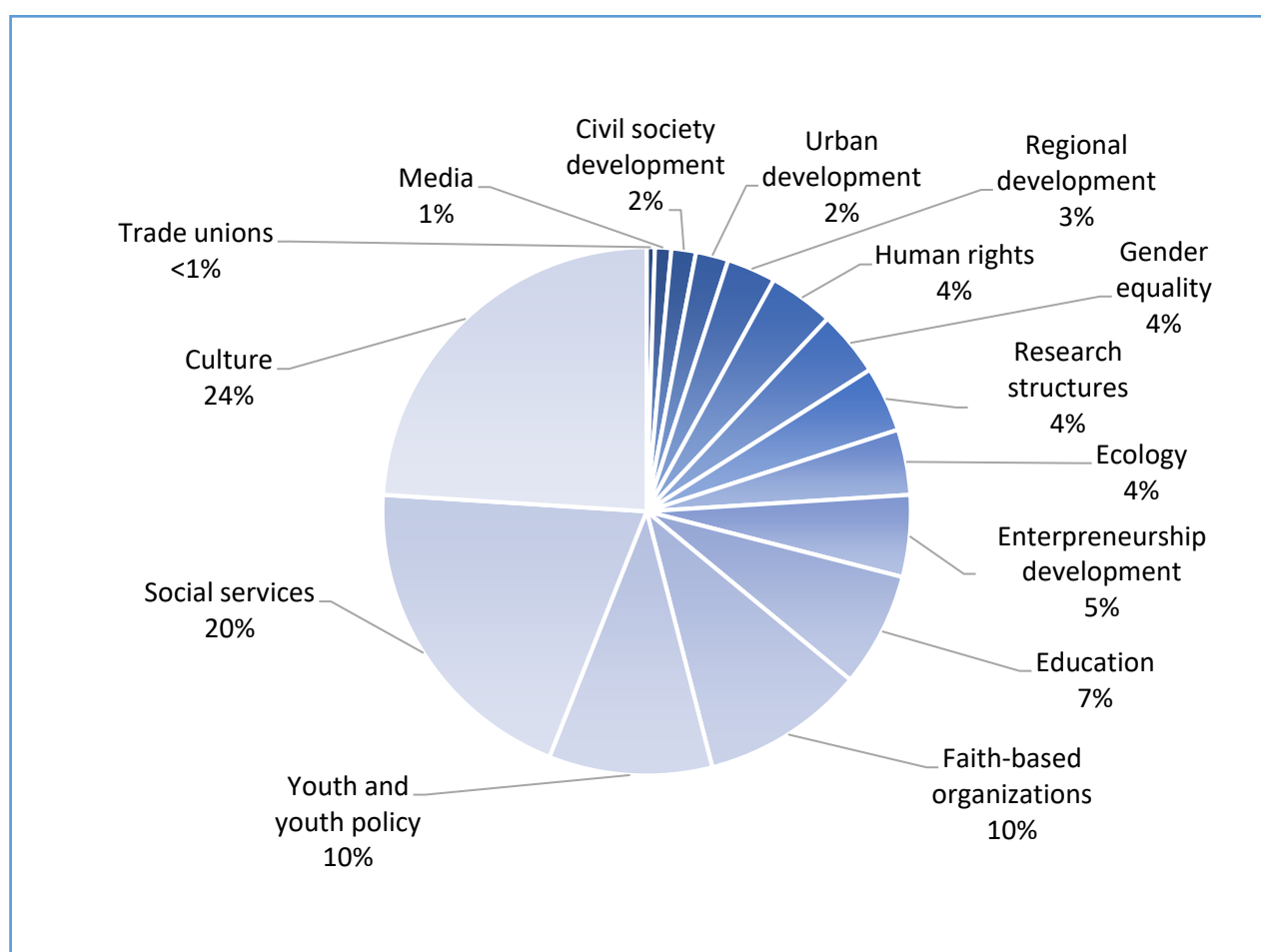
⁴ **Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend)**, see: <http://www.lawtrend.org>.

⁵ **Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum**, see: <http://npbelarus.info>.

Dynamics of development of civil society organizations in Belarus: General characteristics and development trends

One of the problems while describing civil society organizations (CSOs) in Belarus is the lack of adequate statistics to track the dynamics of the number and changes in the structure of organizations. The available statistics do not provide an opportunity to estimate the number of CSOs actually operating in Belarus. Based on expert assessments, we assume that the total number of non-governmental organizations (registered in Belarus as public associations and in other organizational and legal forms, registered in other countries, as well as unregistered) can be equal to about 3,000 organizations according to rough estimates.⁶ It is difficult to estimate the size of the thematic sectors, even by formal criteria such as the number of organizations and initiatives. Based on data on the number of CSOs from different sources, expert estimates and assessments, it is possible to present only the ratio of the volumes of different thematic sectors (see Chart 1).

Chart 1. Representation of thematic sectors (by the number of CSOs) in the overall structure of civil society in Belarus, %



⁶ See: Andrei Yahorau, Andrei Shutau, Nikolay Katsuk. **The Belarusian civil society: current state and conditions of development** [in Russian], Working Paper, Center for European Transformation, 2017: https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2017_Civil-Society-Belarus-RU.pdf.

CSOs sectors engaged in culture and social services are the “largest” (and comparable) regarding the number of organizations and initiatives. Next follow youth CSOs; faith-based organizations; CSOs engaged in education or educational services; business associations and public organizations developing the business environment and business culture in Belarus. The smallest as regard the number of organizations are the sectors of independent trade unions; CSOs working with “new” areas such as media and urbanism; CSOs engaged in the development of civil society.

Each sector of CSOs is certainly specific, but it is possible to identify some comparative and general characteristics of CSOs development. The most dynamic development in the last three years is observed in the sector of business associations, as well as “new” sectors working in the media sphere and urbanism. The situation in the sector of youth CSOs and initiatives, gender organizations, CSOs working with regional development, education and culture is not so dynamic, but is changing significantly. Sectors of faith-based organizations, as well as environmental and social CSOs are developing in a more or less stable manner. An important reformatting in the structure of influence and agenda can be noted in the sector of human rights organizations, CSOs engaged in the development of civil society, as well as in the sector of independent analytical and research institutions and initiatives (think-tanks). In its own stable way, although on the verge of permanent destruction, operates the sector of independent trade unions.

External factors of development

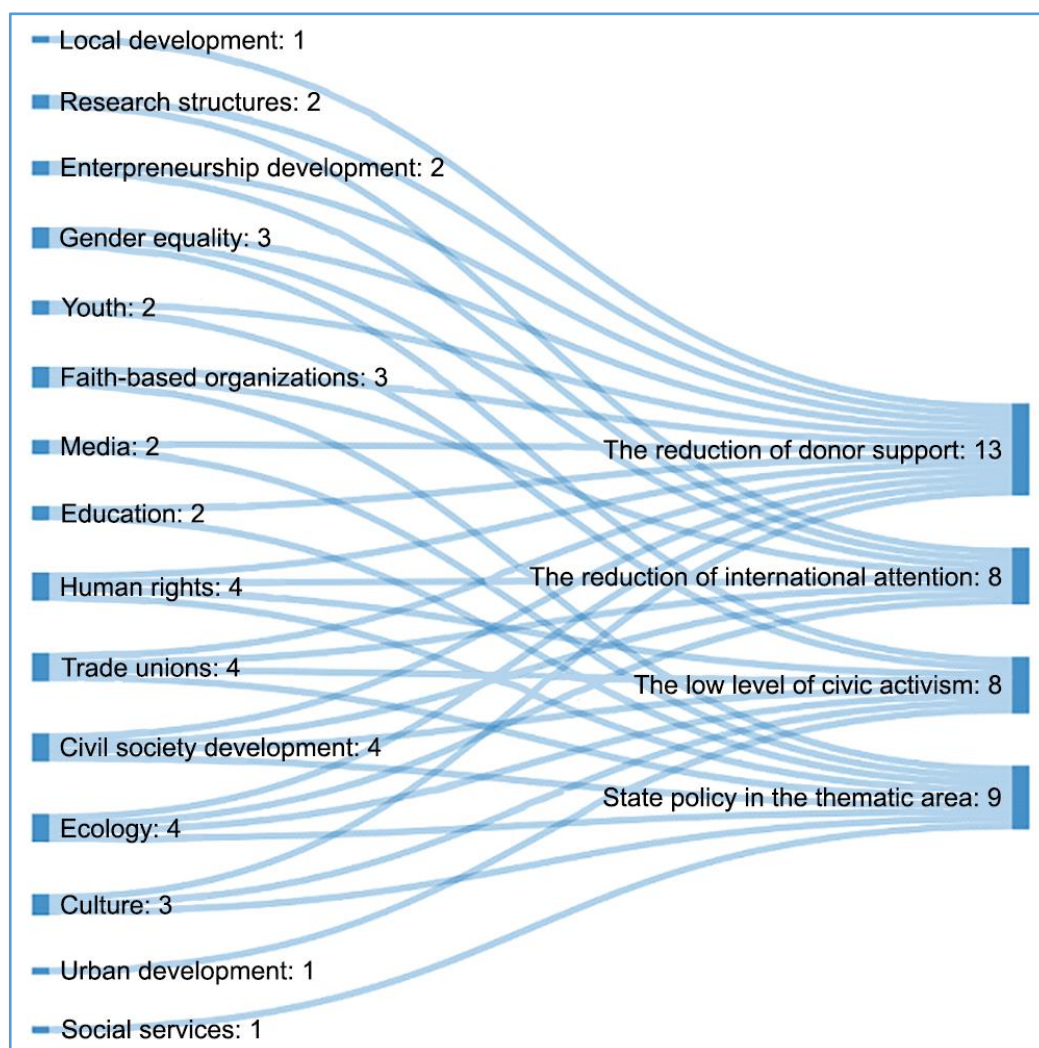
The strongest negative external factor, which in the last three years has influenced the development of almost all sectors of CSOs, was the reduction or redistribution of donor resources from Western programs (experts from 13 sectors named it as a problem). The overall drop of international interest to the Belarusian agenda and the development of relations between Belarus and the EU in a bilateral format without the participation of Belarusian CSOs had a negative impact on most of the thematic sectors.

Similar in strength of negative influence are the national-scale factors: state policy in different thematic areas and general level of civil participation and political culture in Belarus (see Chart 2). Despite the fact that many civil society players noted as a positive factor the arrival of a “new generation” in civic activism and the activation of civic engagement in certain areas, this phenomenon is localized mainly in the sphere of leisure, self-development and redesigning of a narrow local urban space for life.

The economic crisis and the decline in living standards in Belarus have had a negative impact mainly on those sectors whose organizations have internal sources of funding and actually live on membership fees or donations. These are primarily independent trade unions, faith-based organizations and business associations. The Russia-Ukraine war and the resulting intensification of Russian propaganda and information war were noted as a problematic factor in the sector of media work and the development of civil society.

Only three external factors with positive influence over the development of CSOs were mentioned and the power of their influence is much lower. First, it is a global process of information technologies and means of communication development (its impact is most noticeable in the sectors of CSOs related to the media sphere, education, urban development, and in the youth sector). Second, it is the activation of Belarusian business, which has also become a factor in the development of a number of CSOs sectors: first of all, of course, sectors that provide support to business and entrepreneurship, local development, media and the economic part of research institutions (think-tanks). Finally, the change of the state policy towards “soft Belarusization” intensified the activity in the sector of cultural organizations, bringing about though contradictory, but obvious shifts (see Chart 2).

Chart 2. External factors identified by experts from the CSOs thematic sectors as having a negative impact on the development of their respective sectors



Internal problems of development

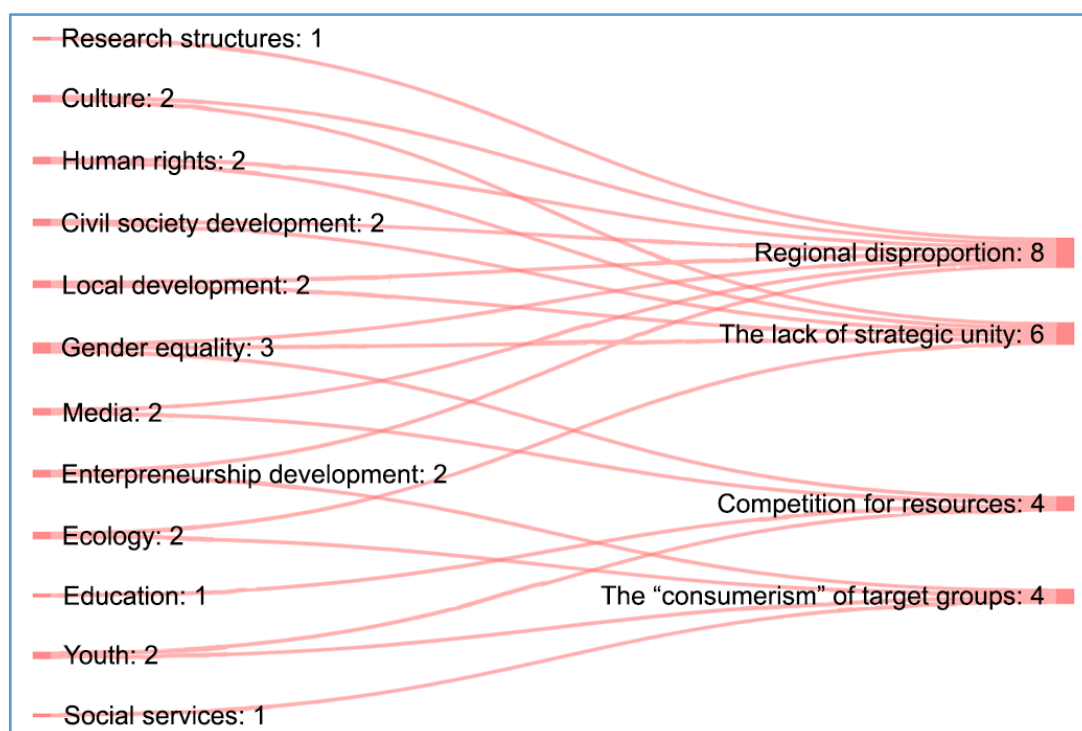
With regard to internal problems, the CSOs regional disproportion remains the most acute. Despite the fact that in recent years there has been some progress in overcoming the dominance of Minsk and regional centers in the structure of civic activism, the spread of their activities and agenda in the regions remains a problem for most sectors.

The second most important problem of CSOs development is the existence of strategic contradictions between organizations of the same sector or a perceived lack of strategic vision for the sector development. Most often, such contradictions relate to the priority problems to be solved by the sector, and to the strategy of relations with other actors — first of all, state and international structures. At the same time, it should be understood that in those CSOs sectors where this problem is not identified, there is not necessarily a consistency of views and approaches and there is a general vision of the long-term prospects for the sector development. In some sectors, there is no such need or the problem is not recognized as such.

Less common development problems are: “consumer” attitude of target groups (who are ready to use the services of public organizations, but are not ready for active support or delegation in decision-making); competition for

resources, which sometimes takes unfair character; “image of being part of opposition”; low level of cooperation and poor readiness to participate in decision-making in certain thematic sectors and others (see Chart 3).

Chart 3. The most common internal problems constraining sector development, identified by experts from CSOs thematic sectors



Development trends over the last three years

Among the general trends of development it should be noted the emergence of CSOs new topics and priorities (often this is due to another fairly common trend over the last three years, i.e. access to new target groups). The emergence and spread of new priorities are determined by different factors: from the emergence of demand within the Belarusian society for certain types of activities (for example, educational or social services) to the changed priorities of donors policy.

Another significant trend over the last three years has been an influence increase of the business, especially in such areas as media, education, culture, local development, social problems solving. It should be noted that here the point is not only about the cooperation of CSOs and business, but also about increasing attention and independent participation of the Belarusian private sector in the development of these thematic areas.

Regional disparities remain a problem in most of CSOs thematic sectors, but a number of experts in the fields of culture, education, media, social services and environment note a lessening of this imbalance and a fairly dynamic development of regional activity.

For some CSOs sectors, an increased use of various tools has been a steady trend in recent years: crowd-funding, the use of international mechanisms, the creation and strengthening of media infrastructure.

Trying to take advantage of the “opening opportunities” in the context of the relative liberalization of recent years, some organizations of the thematic areas that have a marker of “being an opposition” (human rights defenders,



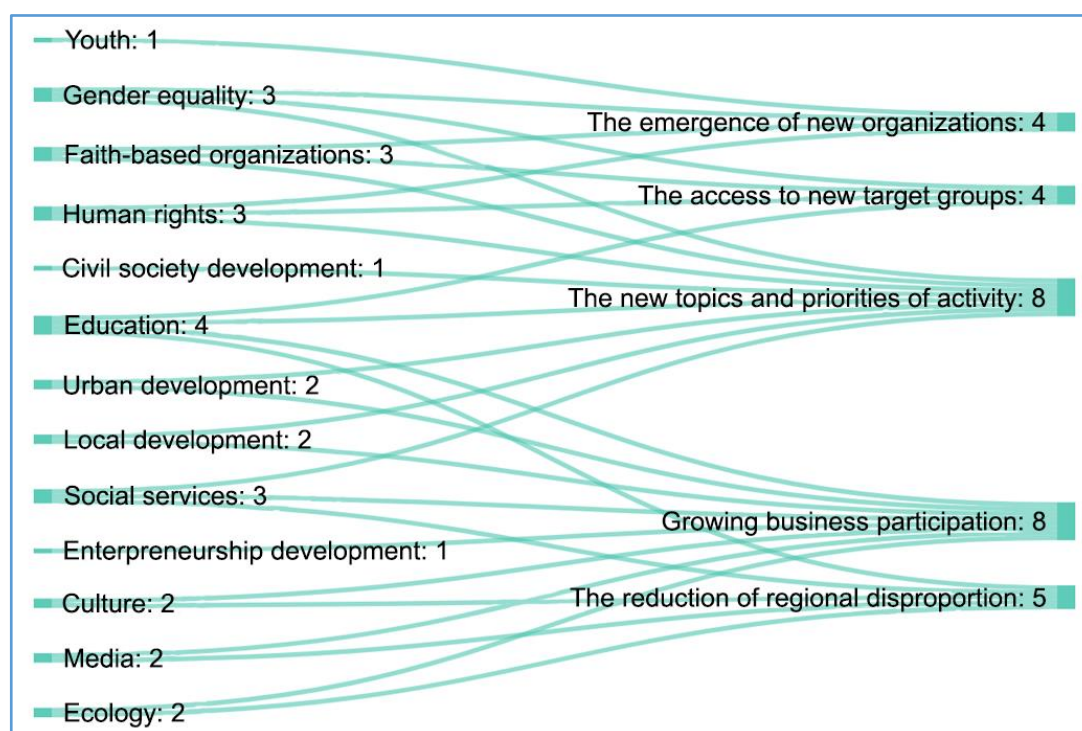
organizations promoting national culture, youth policy, development of civil society) try to depoliticize their own agenda, what sometimes leads to increased self-censorship and to external and internal conflicts over values.

Almost complete inability to find resources for long-term programs has become a specific trend for CSOs working in culture and education areas, as well as for think tanks. As a result, with a general increase in activity in these sectors, there are no mechanisms to ensure the preservation and development of the intellectual and cultural environment, what is a serious threat to reproduction in these areas.

A notable phenomenon in recent years has been the development of public spaces (such as the Gallery of Contemporary Art “Ź”, Culture Center “Corpus”, IMAGURU, Culture Pub “OK16”, CECH, etc.), providing, on the one hand, infrastructure opportunities for CSOs activities, and, on the other, becoming independent players, who “accumulate” civic and cultural activities on a particular basis. The impact of this process on the CSOs cultural and educational sectors, as well as on the development of urban activism, is particularly noticeable.

Experts from the human rights and environmental sectors, as well as the business and enterprise support and development sector, noted the CSOs growing competence and professionalism in these sectors as a sustainable trend in recent years. In some areas (gender equality, urban development, social services, economic analysis), there has been an increase in the request for expertise from public authorities and international institutions. At the same time, access to the decision-making as a more or less sustainable process was noted only in the urban development sector (and only in connection with urban planning and development) and in the business association sector (the only sector that has succeeded in developing sustainable cooperation with authorities in recent years) (see Chart 4).

Chart 4. The most common development trends identified by experts from CSOs thematic sectors



Cooperation within thematic sectors and in civil society as a whole

Most CSOs sectors have their own instruments and practice of consolidating or organizing joint actions in case of need to support some positions, statements or appeals on common sectoral topics. Participation of other CSOs as experts, co-organizers, speakers and participants is a widespread form of interaction. The focus on the exchange of experience and competencies is perhaps the most common factor of interaction for all sectors.

In those CSOs sectors where the expert component is in demand (e.g. human rights and environmental), it is common practice to establish working groups from different organizations to work on analytical or expert opinions and documents. The work of such groups can be long-term.

Project cooperation or running common partnership programs is much rarer and is sometimes problematic. The most problematic level of interaction for all CSOs sectors (where there is awareness of such a need) is the harmonization of common approaches and priorities, attempts to develop common strategies for the sector.

If we compare the level of cooperation in different sectors of the Belarusian civil society, the human rights sector and the sector of business and entrepreneurship development look the most consolidated. There is also a high level of cooperation and interaction in the environmental and trade union sectors. The lowest density of interaction is observed in CSOs sectors working with gender equality and identity, urban and regional development, as well as in faith-based organizations.

Forms and types of cooperation and interaction with CSOs from other sectors differ little from the forms of intra-sector cooperation — these are the same solidarity campaigns, joint statements, personal participation, organization of joint activities, implementation of projects. At the same time, the most consolidated sectors of CSOs — the human rights sector and the sector of business associations — have the least interaction with organizations from other sectors. Experts from the gender sector and faith-based organizations perceive the low level of cooperation with other CSOs as a problem. In other sectors, the level of cooperation with other CSOs is perceived as satisfactory.

As for the tools and platforms for representing the common interests of Belarusian civil society, we have to admit that there has been no significant progress in this regard in recent years. Such platforms as the Assembly of NGOs of Belarus and the EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform (BNP), that are bringing together CSOs having different topics and spheres of activities, have existed over the last three years in the stabilization regime rather than the one of dynamic changes.

The interaction of Belarusian civil society organizations with other actors (political parties, business, state)

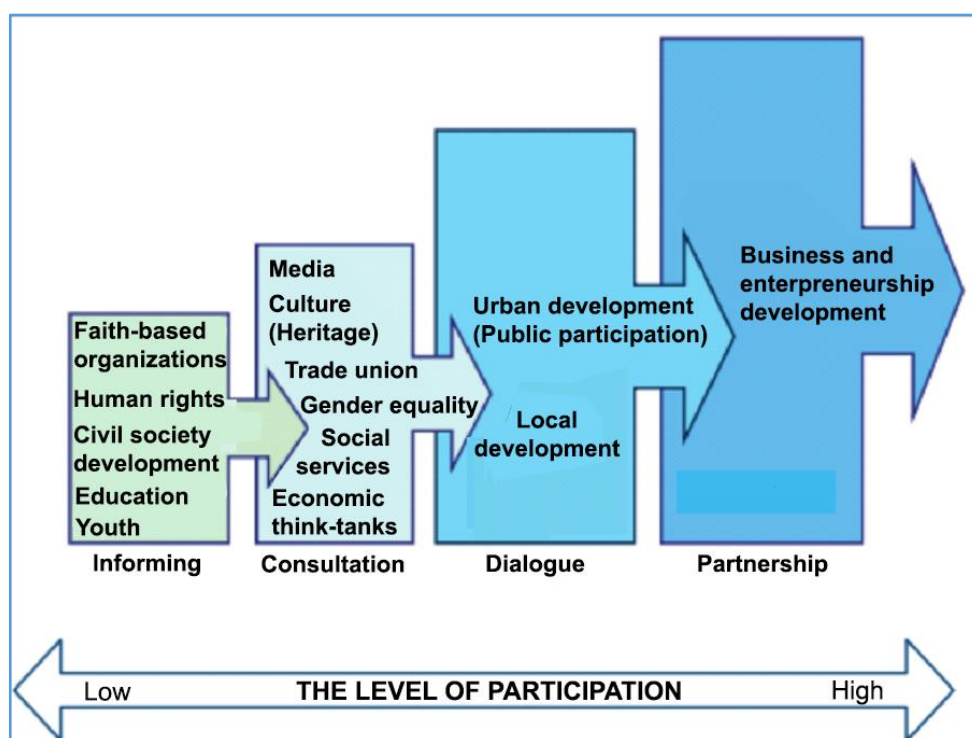
There has been a steady regression in the interaction of Belarusian CSOs with **political parties** over the past 8-10 years. To date, the intensity of relations between civic organizations and initiatives with political organizations and initiatives is close to zero.

Relations between CSOs and **Belarusian business** have been developing most dynamically over the last three years. Perhaps this dynamic looks so impressive because 3-5 years ago the level of this kind of interaction was extremely low. The dynamics of relations between CSOs and the private sector have been influenced by a number of factors: (1) the relative liberalization of business and social activity in Belarus; (2) the continued restrictive nature of national legislation on philanthropy, sponsorship, opportunities to support CSOs projects and interaction with them; (3) the reorientation of Belarusian CSOs to search for internal resources to carry out activities; (4) the development of a culture of business and entrepreneurship, the dissemination of ideas of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

With the overall increase in the volume and variety of formats of interaction between civil society and business, experts note its limitations. First of all, it is connected with the agenda and “horizon” of representation of the majority of Belarusian businessmen about social responsibility; secondly, with selectivity in interaction and careful avoidance of any topics and formats which can be interpreted as political; thirdly, with (quite natural) desire of receiving benefit from supporting civic campaigns or initiatives which, having full absence of the state privileges or other types of encouragement, can be received only thanks to public relations efforts. All these limits lead to the fact that topics of human rights or the development of civil society cannot count on the support of Belarusian business in the near future.

Despite the active rhetoric of another “thaw”, there has been no significant progress in the relations of Belarusian CSOs with **state bodies** over the last three years. At the same time, the growth of economic and social problems pushes both central and local authorities to use the resources of civic organizations more intensively. However, at the local level, the interaction between CSOs and state bodies still largely depends on situational factors and, first of all, on the attitudes, perceptions and will of specific officials, stereotypes or self-censorship in local administrations, the established image (assessed by the criterion of loyalty) of specific CSOs.

Figure 1. Level of interaction between CSOs from different thematic sectors and the authorities



At the national level, the situation is no less complex. A large number of platforms for interaction and consultations with civil society have been created under Belarusian ministries and agencies, but most of them either do not work at all, or perform a decorative function, at best — the function of mutual information and positioning. The most working, in terms of the real CSOs participation, platforms at the national level are: The Council for the improvement of social and labour legislation under the Ministry of Labour and social protection, the Public Coordination Council under the Ministry of Nature, the National Interagency Council on disability, the Country Coordination Committee on Cooperation with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

The demand for independent expertise is growing primarily in the field of economy: The National Bank, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy, recently also — the Ministry of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade, regularly use the results of independent think-tanks work. The Ministry of foreign affairs in the process of another

normalization round of relations with the EU is also forced to interact with civil society in the framework of a number of formats: “Human Rights Dialogue”, EU-Belarus Coordination Group. The difference from the last round of liberalization (2008-2010) is that today EU politicians are ready to take a much calmer attitude to the imitation of civil society participation in such formats, what greatly weakens the influence of independent CSOs position even when there are such “dialogue platforms”.

The state of interaction of public associations with the authorities at various stages of decision-making can be presented with the help of the public participation matrix by analyzing at what level this interaction happens (see Figure 1).

Conditions for the development of civil society in Belarus

Political conditions

According to the estimates of civil society activists, expressed in the course of the interview, the political conditions of activity in Belarus have not changed over the last three years. There are no significant changes in the field of the rule of law, which means that law enforcement practice remains more important than legislative changes, opportunities and limitations. The conditions for public participation and guarantees of fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens remain virtually unchanged.

Belarus continues its tactical geopolitical maneuvering between EU and Russia, and despite the fact that after the events in Ukraine in 2014-2015, the rhetoric of Europeanization and liberalization has significantly intensified, no significant, let alone irreversible, changes in political conditions are taking place. Depending on the pragmatics of the current government, there are new opportunities in a number of spheres: the development of entrepreneurship, “soft Belarusization”, in the last year — the development of the IT sector and of the “new economy”, but the controllability of these processes (and the possibility of a rollback to the previous state at any time) as well as the non-systemic nature of changes are obvious. “Flirting” with the International Labour Organization (ILO) takes place at the same time with the adoption of the “decree on parasites” and “trade union case”, “soft Belarusization” — with the “patriots case”, joining the Bologna process — with the increasing pressure on student organizations.

Legal conditions

Registration of non-profit organizations

The legislation allows the judicial authorities, which are responsible for the registration of public associations and foundations, to deny registration to almost any new initiative. This is achieved, on the one hand, through strict criteria that must be met. On the other hand, the adopted dispositions of the legislation on possible grounds for refusal to register public associations and foundations are very vague.

Given the difficulties in registering public associations and foundations, there is a steady trend within the civil society to greater share of organizations that are registered in the form of established legal entities (institutions) that are not based on membership. This form of NGO, according to the legislation, is registered on basis of application principle in the same order that is established for commercial legal entities. However, a purely technical procedure for pre-approval of organization's name by the executive bodies, designed to prevent the registration of organizations with the same names, often becomes an obstacle to the registration of institutions. In some cases, such refusals clearly have political motives and are associated with the reluctance of the authorities to allow the creation of NGOs having a certain type of activity (for example, human rights).

Criminal liability for the activities of unregistered organizations

A ban on the activities of unregistered organizations was established in Belarus in 1999. On December 2, 2005, the Parliament adopted amendments to the Criminal code of the Republic of Belarus, which was supplemented by article 193-1. In accordance with the provision of the article, organization of activities or participation in the activities of public association, religious organization or foundation in respect of which a decision of the public authority on its liquidation or suspension of its activities has entered into legal force, is punishable by fine or arrest for up to 6 months, or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years. Under pressure from Belarusian

organizations and the international community, the authorities have restrained from imposing criminal sentences under this article since 2008. Nevertheless, the article 193-1 continues to be used as a preventive measure.

On June 29, 2018, the draft Law of the Republic of Belarus “on amendments to some codes of the Republic of Belarus” was adopted. Among other things, the bill provides for the exclusion of Article 193-1 from the Criminal code and the introduction to the Code of administrative offences of a new article 23.88 with a similar content. Thus, there is a decriminalization of activities on behalf of unregistered organizations and the replacement of criminal liability by administrative one in the form of a fine. Powers to consider cases of administrative offences under this article are proposed to be given to justice authorities and internal affairs bodies, which means an **extrajudicial** procedure for imposing fines. It is a matter of serious concern that after these changes, the practice of prosecuting unregistered organizations might resume.

Restrictions on the activities of civil society organizations

The most significant restrictions on the activities of civil society organizations in Belarus are in the area of realization of such rights as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, access to information. For example, restrictions in the legislation on mass events (the permissive principle of their conduct, the complexity and duration of the procedure for obtaining permission, etc.) affect the freedom of public action of civil society organizations during meetings, rallies, street processions. There is constant interference by the state in the activities of human rights organizations and the media when the latter exercise their professional activities. Thus, in 2017 and 2018, there were numerous cases of detention of human rights defenders while they were monitoring mass events.

The Belarusian legislation provides for a number of restrictions concerning the CSOs advocacy activities. In particular, funds may not have statutory objectives related to the identification and expression of political will of citizens. Non-profit organizations, besides educational institutions, are not entitled to carry out educational activities in accordance with the Code on education. There are limits on NGOs right to represent the interests of their target groups in the courts. State authorities apply repressive measures against CSOs and activists: detentions, administrative arrests, searches of offices and apartments, as well as confiscation of office equipment and data storage devices. There is also the practice of criminal prosecution and expulsion from the country for political reasons.

Conditions of financial activities for non-profit organizations

In the Republic of Belarus, access of non-profit organizations to internal and external funding is significantly limited.

The legislation regulates the procedure for providing free aid from Belarusian legal entities and individual entrepreneurs and dresses a closed list of possible purposes for which this assistance can be provided. Among these purposes, there are no many traditional activities of civil society actors: human rights, gender equality, environmental protection, protection of animals, improvement of the situation of children, support of talented youth, etc. For violation of the legislation on gratuitous (grant) aid, administrative liability is provided: for example, for the use of assistance for purposes prohibited by legislation, or its provision without contracting, a fine of up to 200 basic units (about 2000 euros) may be imposed.

Public associations are prohibited running entrepreneurial activity of their own and are prevented from receiving funds through the sale of their own products, publications or the provision of services.

There are no special provisions regulating charitable and volunteer activities in the country. At the same time, their adoption may further overregulate the financial activities of non-profit organizations. In practice, one can observe



development of fund-raising within the country, primarily for social and cultural purposes, through charity events, the installation of special boxes for donations, crowd-funding platforms.

The system of state support for CSOs in Belarus is extremely underdeveloped and is mainly based on direct financing from national and local budgets of several organizations loyal to the state (and in fact, fully controlled and directed by state bodies): Public Association “The Belarusian Republican Youth Union” (BRSM), Public Association “The Belarusian Women Union”, the Association of Veterans, etc. Main part of the state funds provided under the state social contracting programme is sent to the Nationwide Public Association “Belarus Red Cross Society” (BRC) and its regional offices.⁷ Thus, this mechanism remains available only to a limited number of social NGOs, because, among others, of the difficulties in fulfilling the burdensome requirements of the legislation on the social contracting.⁸

The practice of criminal punishment for non-payment of taxes on donations, which had been used for human rights activities of the organization, started in 2011 in relation to the head of the Human Rights Center “Viasna” Aleś Bialiatiski, was resumed in 2017. A criminal case was launched against the chairman of the independent Belarusian trade union of radio-electronic industry workers (REP) Henadz Fiadynich and his deputy Ihar Komlik under article 243 of the Criminal code of the Republic of Belarus (tax evasion).⁹ On August 24, 2018, the leaders of the independent trade union were sentenced to restriction of freedom to for a period of 4 years for allegedly evading taxes and fees on particularly large amounts of money received for the activities of the trade union. The are also forbidden to hold official senior posts for the period of 5 years.

Main conclusions

Briefly summarizing the current state of civil society in Belarus, it is possible to note some basic features of its functioning and trends of changes:

1. The number of civil society organizations in comparison with other countries of similar level of economic development remains rather low. At the same time, there there is growth in number of more informal and not seeking formalization initiatives of mainly social, cultural and lifestyle character.
2. There is still a disproportion in the development of a number of civil society sectors, with sectoral development having different dynamics. Moreover, if earlier the internal policy of the Belarusian state and the support of Western players had worked for the development of different sectors and thematics, in recent years, in connection with the regional crisis and changes in the attitudes of international players, these two policies are increasingly converging. As a result, public activity is increasingly being redirected to areas far from political and civic education and action.
3. Regional disparities in the development of civil society and the dominance of Minsk and major cities as the CSOs main activities places remain, although in recent years the share of regional activity in certain sectors has increased.

⁷ See: **Social service system in the Republic of Belarus** [in Russian], Ministry of labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Belarus: http://mintrud.gov.by/ru/conference_ru/view/sistema-sotsialnogo-obslyuzhivaniya-v-respublike-belarus_398/page/2.

⁸ See: **Freedom of association and legal status of non-profit organizations in Belarus in 2017** [in Russian], Annual report, Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend), Assembly of NGOs of Belarus, 2017: <http://www.lawtrend.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/SA-2017-updated.pdf>.

⁹ See: **KGC opened a criminal case against the leadership of the independent trade union REP in connection with tax evasion** [in Russian], Interfax.by, 02.08.2017: <https://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/1228256>.

4. The dominance of service-oriented organizations in the overall structure of civil society is increasing, new membership organizations are practically not created, membership in the established organizations of this type is often formal. There is an increase in the number of institutions in the total share of new public organizations. The increase in the number of non-member organizations (or formalization, imitation of membership relations) leads to a low demand for democratic decision-making mechanisms in Belarusian CSOs.
5. The Belarusian authorities continue to divide civil society on the basis of its independence and loyalty. In this case, when choosing partners for interaction, not only the actual position of organizations or activists matters, but also their “history”. The level of cooperation of state bodies with CSOs is limited in most cases by the level of consultations. The participation of civil society in the various stages of decision-making is limited to the preparation of decisions. Except for single cases, CSOs are excluded from the stages of decision selection, execution, monitoring and review.
6. The impact of donors on intra-sector stratification remains high, and their policies are inconsistent with the needs of the sector itself (trends to work with “transparent” organizations, focus on specific topics, etc.) in almost all CSOs sectors. There has been an increase in GONGOs in the total number of civil society organizations over the past three years, across different sectors and topics. Independent CSOs are increasingly being pushed out from receiving foreign grants.
7. The practice of attracting internal resources to ensure CSOs activities is growing, crowdfunding and crowdsourcing tools are developing, communication and interaction with business is intensifying. The spread of such practices is limited, firstly, by the imperfection of the Belarusian legislation, which does not contribute to the development of charity and financial participation in public affairs of both individuals and legal entities, and, secondly, by the level of welfare and civil culture in the country. For a number of areas and topics (human rights activities, infrastructure projects in the field of culture and education, stigmatized topics in social policy) such internal resources will not be available in the near future.
8. Public awareness about the activities of civil society also remains at a low level, civil society as a separate actor does not appear on the screen of mass consciousness. The involvement of the Belarusian population in civil society organizations activities remains quite low, but the composition and social structure of the active part of society is changing.
9. The change in the region, a new round of confrontation between Russia and the West, and unfolding of the information war produce a number of challenges. The Belarusian civil society is not ready to respond to them adequately so it is forced to face a change in the conditions, adapting to the new situation.
10. Political conditions in the country remain consistently unfavorable for civil society development, despite the rhetoric of liberalization, no real changes over the past three years can be recorded. The level of restrictions on the civil society's freedom to act, including the unfavourable legal and financial climate, has remained virtually unchanged. There is a gap between the laws and the practice of law enforcement, as well as selectivity of law enforcement.

Annex

The profile of individual sectors of civil society organizations

It is not possible to give a complete description of each of the sectors here, so we will limit ourselves to the background information on the most significant actors, some of the problems and trends in the development of each sector.

Human rights

In the human rights sector, there are about 30-40 organizations and initiatives, depending on the approach to the definition of human rights activities. Among purely human rights organizations, Human Rights Center “Viasna” and Public Association “The Belarusian Helsinki Committee” (BHC) are the organizations with the most broad activities profile and at the same time the longest history. They constitute a stable and dense “core” of the sector together with more specialized CSOs, such as Public Association “The Belarusian Association of Journalists” (BAJ), Assembly of NGOs of Belarus, Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend), Committee for the Protection of the Repressed “Solidarity”, Belarusian Documentation Center. A special place in the sector is occupied by the Barys Zvozhskau Belarusian Human Rights House, which is an important element for the development of the entire sector infrastructure.

In recent years, a number of new organizations have emerged, active and recognized within the sector, which focus on the protection of the rights and freedoms of specific groups, including: Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities (2010), Human Rights Initiative “Journalists for Tolerance” (j4t) (2010), Expert and Legal Partnership “FORB Initiative” (2014), MAKEOUT project (2014), Social and Educational Public Association “The Movement of Mothers 328” (2015), Human Constanta (the Institution “Advisory Centre on current international practices and their implementation in law “Human Constanta”) (2016), Centre for the Promotion of Women’s Rights — Her Rights (2016), Human Rights Initiative Group “Identity and Law” (2016).

The regional imbalance in the sector is very large. In practice, there are only two sustainable human rights organizations regionally: Homiel Center for Strategic Litigation and Mahiloŭ Human Rights Center. The rest of the activities outside of Minsk are carried out either through the regional offices of HRC “Viasna”, Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) and Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), or on a personal level.

Over the last 3-5 years, some new trends have emerged in the human rights CSOs sector. New organizations and initiatives emerge. The topic of discrimination against different groups (people with disabilities, LGBT+, gender agenda) is developing in addition to the traditional agenda in the field of civil and political rights. Socio-economic rights and extending the human rights-based approach are also new agenda items. Experts note the growing professionalism of some human rights organizations, which indicates an increase in the potential of influence. Partial displacement of the human rights agenda from the Belarus-EU relations due to changes in the EU policy towards Belarus became a negative trend for human rights defenders in recent years. Another limitation for the development of the sector is still a low level of reception of human rights activities in the Belarusian society. The level and adequacy of knowledge and ideas of Belarusians about human rights defenders and human rights organizations remains low.

Faith-based organizations

Faith-based organizations can be divided into three types. First, these are religious organizations (communities, churches, associations). Another type of religious organizations, differing in the purposes of creation and legal

status, are brotherhoods, sisterhoods, missions, as well as spiritual educational institutions. They can have a wide range of goals, including educational, awareness-raising, humanitarian and social projects. The most visible in Belarus are the following: Interdenominational Mission “Christian Social Service”, Charitable Religious Mission “Return” of the Evangelical Integrated Church, Religious Mission “Youth with a Mission” of Religious Association of Communities of Full Gospel Christians, Religious Mission “Charitable Catholic Society CARITAS”. Finally, the third type is represented by non-profit organizations created by believers in the form of public associations, institutions, partnerships, etc. The most notable of them are: companies or large international charities (such as ACET), Charitable Public Association “Protecting life as it begins and the genetic code of the people “Salvation of Infants”, Nationwide Public Association “Mothers Against Drugs”, Charitable Awareness-Raising Institution “Good Prospects”, Social Charitable Institution “Reformation of the Individual”, Female Youth Organization “YWCA Belarus” (registered as Public Association “The Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women”), Nationwide Charitable Public Association “Life”, Nationwide Public Association “BlagoTvori”, Simple Partnership “Family Festival”.

We should also mention the organizations of research or expert nature, acting as infrastructural elements for the the sector: International Public Association “Center for the Study of Contemporary Religiosity”, Cultural Awareness-Raising Institution “Centre Ecumena”, FORB Initiative.

Most of the large and active organizations are concentrated in Minsk and regional centers, but at the local level there are quite a lot of organizations and institutions, most often created under Christian churches to deal with most pressing social problems.

The activities of faith-based organizations, beyond the confessions and dissemination of faith, have always focused and continue to focus primarily on helping people in crisis situations (orphans, the elderly, people with disabilities, alcohol and drug addicts, prisoners and those released from prison). The range of work with religious education is gradually expanding, as well as cultural and awareness-raising projects aimed at disseminating the values of the family, reproductive health, and abortion prevention. In recent years, the agenda of these organizations includes topics of family violence, biotechnology. Another topic that is growing in this sector is national culture and history.

In Belarus, there remains an uneven legislative regulation and law enforcement practice in relation to different faiths. Thus, registration of religious organizations and Protestant communities has been practically frozen over the last three years. A similar situation exists for “non-traditional” religions in Belarus. Most often, communities continue to operate despite the lack of registration, but this seriously hinders their development. Relations with state bodies remain uneven and unstable.

Gender equality

The most traditional and stable gender organizations are the so-called “women's” organizations focused primarily on the rights of women (in Belarus there are about 30 registered organizations of this type). Currently the most active organizations in this cluster are: International Public Association “Gender Perspectives”, YWCA Belarus, “Radzislava”, Feminist Initiative “Gender Route”, as well as several new organizations that have emerged in recent years: Centre for the Promotion of Women's Rights — Her Rights, Family Support Public Association “Birth”, MAKEOUT project. We should also note the Public Association “The Belarusian Women's Union”, which is a classic example of a GONGO, active and efficient in its own way.

Another trend in recent years is that since many donor structures (especially large ones) have started to rely on gender mainstreaming of CSOs and gender issues are included in the cross-cutting topics of many NGOs support programs in Belarus, organizations that are providers of such programs (in particular, Office for Democratic Belarus

(Brussels) (ODB), Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC), New Eurasia Foundation) are also beginning to play a significant role in popularising the topic of gender equality in the Belarusian civil society.

One can see sufficiently strong concentration of gender organizations in Minsk. However, there are several stable organizations in the regional centers of Belarus: Public Association “Mahiloŭ Women's Center for Support and Self-education” (Mahiloŭ), Viciebsk City Women's Public Association “Juliana” (Viciebsk), Barysaŭ Women's Social Public Association “Province” (Barysaŭ), Public Association “Business Women Club” (Brest). In addition, the organization YWCA Belarus has a network structure and representation in the regions; remaining parts of the networks developed by Public Association “The Belarusian Organization of Working Women” and Public Association “The Belarusian Women's League” continue to operate in some places.

The sector experiences a rebirth attempt. This is manifested through the emergence of new initiatives and organizations with different approaches and attitudes, through the loss of positions of the most authoritative leaders of the women's movement in the past (Public Association “Women's Independent Democratic Movement”, Belarusian Organization of Working Women, Belarusian Women's League), as well as through the search for new forms of gender agenda promotion (the most striking example of recent time is the spread of gender marking in job titles).

The topic of women's leadership is gradually moving away from the priorities of gender organizations, but the topic of discrimination on the labour market is actively developing (equality of conditions at the entrance to the labour market, shorter list of prohibited professions for women, “pension trap” for women). The issue of domestic violence is clearly a topical one, the prospect of a new law in this area has consolidated gender organizations efforts.

The society in Belarus preserves ambiguous attitude to the gender agenda. On the one hand, the issues of gender equality, sexism, domestic violence receive more coverage in the media, but rather at the level of scandalous stories than in the form of public discussion, contributing to the change of norms in the Belarusian society. Gender organizations sometimes have problems representing the interests of their target groups, as their attitudes can be much more conservative than the values and ideas that Belarusian feminists are trying to promote.

Independent analytical and research structures

Today in Belarus there are about 40 non-state research and analytical structures (think-tanks). Among them are organizations focused on analysis of policy and transformation processes in the broad sense (Centre for European Transformation (registered as Scientific Research Institution “Analytical Group CET”), Ostrogorski Centre, Institute of Political Studies “Political Sphere”, Public Association “Discussion and Analytical Community “Liberal Club”, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS)); economic research centers (primarily, IPM Research Center (registered as Institution “Research Center of Institute of Privatization and Management”) and Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC), Center for Social and Economic Research “CASE Belarus”); a sectoral or thematic organization (SYMPA Center for Public Administration Research, BIPART research project, Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend), Belarus Security Blog project). In addition, some CSOs have their own research substructures or experts who systematically carry out research or analytical work in the sphere of their interests (International Awareness-Raising Public Association “ACT”, Assembly of NGOs of Belarus, Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC), Leŭ Sapieha Foundation).

There is also a number of structures in this field, positioning themselves as independent, but in one way or another tied to state institutions: Information and Awareness-Raising Institution “Aktualnaja koncepcija”, Information and Awareness-Raising Institution “Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies”, Expert Initiative “Minsk Dialogue”.

Independent structures engaged in sociological research have been almost completely destroyed. After the termination of the activities of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in 2016,

this function is claimed only by the Belarusian Analytical Workroom (BAW) operating in Poland. Such institutions, as the NOVAK, SATIO, International Agency for Social and Marketing Research can perform infrastructure functions, i.e. conduct field surveys, however, they almost do not have their own research programs.

This sector is perhaps the most “Minsk-centered”. The only non-Minsk organization is the Regional Development Agency “Strategic Thought” (Homiel). The IPM Research Center is also trying to involve experts from regions in its training programmes.

The sector is developing unevenly. In recent years, the number of external resources available for independent research and analytical structures has fallen sharply, and this has led to a decrease in the intensity of their activities and the number of research and analytical products. There is still an emphasis on narrowly applied research, but there are no serious academic or long-term programs of socio-political research in Belarus today. There is virtually no demand for political analysis due to the absence of actually existing political players; civil society organizations or networks (Green Network Partnership, EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform (BNP)) are sometimes perceived as such, but most of the political think-tanks work along their own “agenda” or agenda from international organizations. The lack of internal criticism and mutual expertise leads to problems with the quality of research and analytical products, the barrier “to enter” the sphere remains low.

Over the last 3-5 years, the interaction of independent economic research institutions with the Belarusian business (mainly small and medium-sized) and a number of government agencies and other state institutions has grown, first of all, it is the National Bank, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy, and recently — the Ministry of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade.

Business and entrepreneurship development

There are about 40 registered business associations in Belarus, but not all of them are active and carry out real activities. The most notable and influential today are: Public Association “Minsk Capital Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers”, Nationwide Confederation of Entrepreneurship (RCE), Business Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers named after Prof. Kuniaŭski (BUEE), Public Association “The Belarusian Union of Entrepreneurs” (BUE), Confederation of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (employers) (Union CIE (E)), Belarusian Scientific and Industrial Association (BSIA). All associations work mainly with small and medium-sized businesses, large businesses are not active in this regard. In addition to the business associations representing the interests of the business as a whole and working with the general conditions of doing business, some industry associations are also influential: Association of International Road Carriers, Nationwide Timber Industry Association, Association of Retail Chains, “Infopark”. These associations lobby the interests of their respective industries.

Another cluster is represented by organizations and initiatives aimed at developing corporate social responsibility, strengthening ties between business, society and the state for the common benefit. Funds that are dealing with this issue in a regular basis: International Social and Economic Fund “Idea”, International Social Fund “Dobra” (registered in 2017, is the organizer of a large-scale competition of social projects “Social Weekend”), some activities and projects are implemented by Public Association “ACT”, Office for Democratic Belarus (Brussels) (ODB), Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC).

New type of organizations have emerged recently, which can also be regarded as part of this sector. They concentrate their efforts on developing human capacity and entrepreneurial culture, improving competencies, intensifying communication between “successful” and “new” businesspeople (for example, public association the Society for the Promotion of Innovative Business, implementing projects such as “Startup School”, the Academy and the Forum “Lipień.PRO”, etc.). As a rule, these are organizations at the intersection of business culture and NGOs.

The most active and influential business associations are concentrated in Minsk, the capital city is clearly leading in both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Nevertheless, business associations have been established and operate at the level of all regional centers, although they differ in intensity of activity. The case with business and CSOs joint projects is similar, cooperation may occur at the level of regional centres (the most favourable situation in this respect is in Brest), but this practice very rarely goes deeper in the regions.

The last three years have shown most dynamic development of the sector. Although the number of business associations is not growing, there has been a qualitative shift in their performance and influence. First of all, this is manifested in the successful lobbying of legislative changes in the field of business conditions, advocacy on individual cases and creation of mechanisms for consultation with government agencies and bodies in the field of economic policy and private sector development. Expert capacity in the sector is increasing, which provides for shifting from particular issues to work with the system changes. The topic of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is developing. Over the last three years a number of large-scale long-playing projects in the social and cultural sphere have been launched with the support of business companies (the contest of social projects “Social Weekend”, “Jazz evenings with BelVEB Bank”, “Read in Belarusian” and “Classics at the Town Hall” with Velcom, etc.), the practice of volunteering as part of the corporate culture of business companies is spreading.

The development of media sphere

The organizations of this sector primarily include a number of traditional CSOs: Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), Association of Regional Press Publishers “United Mass Media”, Local Fund for the “Mass Communications” system promotion, HR Initiative “Journalists for Tolerance” (j4t). These are organizations whose agenda includes freedom of speech, protection of journalists rights, development of the infrastructure of the Belarusian media, issues of journalistic ethics.

In addition, initiatives focusing on the development of market relations in the Belarusian media space and professional development of independent media editors and journalists have become noticeable in the last 3-5 years. First of all these are: Press Club Belarus (Cultural and Awareness Raising Institution “Journalistic Workshop Press Club”) and “School of Journalism” of Johannes Rau International Centre for Education and Exchange (IBB). In addition, some of the successful new media (such as Internet magazines 34.mag.net and CityDog.by) are providers of expert consulting services for other media, developing their priority areas.

The disparity in the development of national and regional media remains, but the gap has been narrowing in recent years. Among other factors, this is due to the focus of the sector organizations on the development of regional media and global trends in the development of “niche” media.

The situation of “relative liberalization” puts independent media in very unstable and unequal conditions. On the one hand, the possibilities of attracting domestic funding are expanding, the development of technologies expands access to the audience; on the other hand, the Belarusian authorities are systematically trying to strengthen the regulation of Internet activity, media legislation is becoming more restrictive. Obstacles in the work of independent media journalists, reluctance of state bodies to serve for them as a source of information, websites blocking, fining journalists for work without accreditation, etc. — all this proves significant (and at the same time fuzzy, uncertain) restrictions on media freedom.

A certain “mainstream” trend is an attempt in pass to market relations that require transparency, including financial one. But, at the same time, many independent resources continue to be semi-legal, which leads to a conflict of transparency and security.

Culture

The sector includes a wide variety of organizations. First, these are long-standing organizations focused on the development of Belarusian culture, language and literature: Public Association “The Belarusian Language Society” (TBM), Union of Belarusian of the World “Bačkaŭščyna”, MBF “Viartaŭne”, Nationwide Public Association “The Belarusian PEN Centre” as well as youth organizations with similar agenda: Student Ethnographic Society (SET), Nationwide Youth Public Association “Historica”. Independent artistic unions are closely connected with them: Union of Belarusian Writers (SBP), Belarusian Union of Designers (BSD). A separate cluster is represented by organizations working with the preservation of architectural heritage: Public Association “The Belarusian Voluntary Society for Protection of Monuments of History and Culture”, Belarusian Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS Belarus). Also noteworthy are a number of dynamic and sustainable initiatives that have emerged in the last decade: Public Campaign “Budźma Biełarusami!” (2008), “Art Siadziba” (“Amaroka”; 2011), “Mova Nanova” (2014).

There is a regional imbalance in the sector, but there has been some progress in regional development in recent years. On the one hand it is connected with the emergence of initiatives that work more with the regions (courses “Mova Nanova” opened in 15 cities, actively working with regional initiatives of “Budźma Biełarusami!” campaign), and with the emergence and development of local cultural sites in cities, including: Center “Koła” and Initiative “Center for Urban Initiatives” (Mahiloŭ), Ethno-shop “Cudoŭnia” (Hrodna), “Kryły chałopa” space (Brest), Time-club “1387” (Babrujsk). However, on a scale smaller than the regional center, long-term cultural projects or initiatives do not survive.

The last three years of the sector's life can be called “contrary development”. A range of conditions for the sector rather become worse (drastic reduction of donor support, lack of support from the state, stagnation and degradation of the state culture institutions), but significant positive developments occurred in the scope of their activities. “Soft Belarusization”, which became a reality of state policy after 2014, led to increased attention to the Belarusian culture, its coming out from the “partisan” sphere. The processes that are associated with national identity building, have received a lot of support from CSOs and business. As a result, the scale of activities associated with the promotion of the Belarusian language, national symbols and values, culture and history has significantly increased.

The field associated with Belarusian literature is developing quite dynamically. The development of “environment for creativity” is noted: schools, competitions, literary awards — there are more than 10 of them nowadays. Independent publishing distribution and reading infrastructure develops, (activities by Łohvinaŭ Bookshop, Belarusian PEN Centre, 1st Belarusian Festival of Intellectual Books “Pradmová”, which was held in May 2018).

Internal funding of culture-related projects develops. Not only events, but also publishing books and producing music albums, carrying out language courses, etc. is supported through crowd-funding models.

More attention is being paid to cooperation with state structures, although the situation is still very uncertain.

Local (regional) development

There are few organizations dealing with local development as the main field of activity: Leŭ Sapieha Foundation, Local Foundation to support the development of international dialogue and cooperation “Interaction”, International Foundation for Development of Rural Areas. In recent years, with varying degrees of activity the following actors have been operating in this area: Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC), New Eurasia Foundation, International Consortium “EuroBelarus”, Assembly of NGOs of Belarus, SYMPA Center for Public Administration Research.



In addition, in the framework of sustainable development programs, many thematic organizations are partners of major regional projects: International Public Association “Ecoproject Partnership” (“Ecopartnership”), Institution “The Center of Environmental Solutions” (CER), Public Association “APB-BirdLife Belarus” (APB), Public Association “The Belarusian Association of Assistance to Children and Young People with Disabilities”, Association “Education for Sustainable Development”, etc.

Despite the specifics of the sector, the main providers of local development are national scale organizations. The number of CSOs providing the infrastructure for local development projects implementation is growing rather slowly in the regions. In addition, nationwide organizations can sometimes rely on local actors in their activities in the regions, for whom these activities (development activities) are not specific.

Organizations of the sector by definition work closely with the local authorities, but the cooperation modes vary. Despite the fact that the rhetoric about CSOs as the “fifth column” has ceased to be voiced at the highest levels of government, there has been no clear “signal” about cooperation with CSOs, so local officials still have a lot of stereotypes and serious concerns about such interaction. After 2-3 years of joint projects, as a rule, relations are improving, but this effect is sometimes offset by frequent change of authorities in the regions and the lack of institutional memory.

Youth and youth policy

The sector of youth organizations is quite diverse in areas and activities, according to some estimates, the sector has about 300 organizations.¹⁰ However, experts within the sector believe that there are currently about a hundred active and working youth organizations. The most notable today are: Public Association “Youth Education Centre “Fialta”, “Studenckaja Rada”, Youth Initiative “Zadzinočarnie Bielaruskich Studentaŭ” (Union of Belarusian Students, ZBS, registered as the Office of Information about the theory of the Bologna process “Filamaty”), Nationwide Youth Public Association “The League of Youth Voluntary Service” (LDTM), Nationwide Youth Public Association “The Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs” (BeIAU), Belarusian Youth Public Association “New Faces”, Brotherhood of Organizers of Student Self-government (BOSS), Office for Initiatives Promotion, “Aktyŭnym być fajna” project (ABF BY).

Movement “Dzieja” created in 2017 is rapidly gaining popularity, as well as created in early 2018 organization “Youth Labour Rights” — Information-Enlightenment Establishment “Office for Assistance and Support to Youth Employment “YoularConsult”).

We should also note the existing student associations: European Association of Law Students in Belarus (ELSA Belarus), Belarusian Association of Architecture Students (BASA), etc., as well as umbrella organization — the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”.

Despite the fact that most of the organizations are concentrated in Minsk, youth activity is developing in the regions. Of course, mainly at the level of regional centers, with most dynamic processes in Viciebsk, Brest, Homiel, Mahiloŭ. Among sustainable regional organizations we can list: Public Association “Center for Information Support of Public Initiatives “Third Sector” (Hrodna), Agency for Regional Development “Dziedzič” (Brest), Homiel Association for Children and Youth (ACDEMO) (Homiel), Vitebsk4Me (Viciebsk), “Aktyŭnym być fajna” project (ABF BY) is active at the regional level, it has regional branches in Brest, Homiel, Hrodna.

¹⁰ See: Andrei Yahorau, Alena Zuikova, Olga Lashkevich, Andrei Shutau, Sviatlana Antashkevich. **Capacity of youth non-governmental organizations and Initiative groups for cooperation in addressing common objectives**, Center for European Transformation, 2016: https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2015_Youth-NGOs-Belarus_EN-OEEC.pdf.

The sector can be considered growing. Although there are few new organizations registered, there is a large number of initiatives that do not seek registration and formalization for one reason or another. The agenda of youth organizations is very broad. In general, it can be divided into two main parts. The first (dominant) covers the topics in which youth activity is developing now: educational opportunities in the country and abroad, gender identity in a broad sense, urbanism, ecology, culture and art (especially street art). The second (much less represented) is connected with the problematic areas, educational and youth policy: youth employment, student rights and self-government, Bologna process, youth participation in youth organizations, development of youth activity in the regions.

Over the past three years, the sector, like other CSOs, has faced reduction in resources due to changes in regional priorities, and during this period the topic of youth and youth policy was excluded from the priority list of many funds and programmes. Internal resources, however, are not added, membership organizations in this sector do not sustain. The way out for the sector is to rely more on voluntary activities.

Organizations of the sector are not included in youth policy decision-making at the level of legislation in this area, despite the fact that the most active of them (especially “RADA” as a network organization) are actively trying to get access to the platforms and mechanisms of dialogue with government bodies.

Education

It is extremely difficult to determine the size of the sector of public organizations in education and education initiatives. The sector is diverse. There are not many CSOs, for which education is the only focus. But a large number of organizations and initiatives from a variety of fields are engaged in activities linked with education. There are two main types of CSOs activities in the field of education: 1) work with the conditions and infrastructure of education of different types and 2) the actual implementation of educational programs or provision of educational services.

Providers of educational programs and services are very diverse. Human rights organizations (HRC “Viasna”, Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House, Belarusian Helsinki Committee), social organizations (Association of non-profit organizations on HIV/AIDS “BelSet anti-AIDS”, Public Association “The Belarusian Association of Assistance to Children and Young People with Disabilities”, Public Association “Nationwide Association of Wheelchair Users”), gender and environmental organizations (Environmental Project “Green University”, APB-BirdLife Belarus) often have their own specialized educational programs and courses. CSOs engaged in adult education (DVV International programs in Belarus, Center “Third Sector” and “Golden Age University” program), implement educational programs based on the needs of the local communities or aimed at the formation of certain competencies (language, cultural, civil, etc.). Youth organizations implement educational and awareness-raising programs for their target audience (Youth Education Center “Fialta”), internships and exchanges (Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs, YMCA Belarus). Intellectual initiatives have created several sustainable programs of “higher education”, forming a kind of alternative to traditional higher education (Belarusian Collegium, Flying University, European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus (ECLAB)). Recently, initiatives that work with home education etc have been developed.

The field of work with the development of education infrastructure and educational policy is also diverse. First, such work is available at each level of education: pre-school and school education, work with teachers (Nationwide Public Association “The Belarusian School Society”, Association for the promotion of educational initiatives in the field of exact sciences and high technologies “Education for the Future”); higher education, work with university teachers, universities (student organizations, Belarusian independent Bologna Committee); and, in addition, attempts to influence the educational policy in general and the framework conditions of educational activities



(Association of Life-Long Learning and Enlightenment, Association for Business Education, Association "Education for Sustainable Development").

The imbalance in the development of educational CSOs and initiatives between Minsk and the regions is obvious, although, at least at the level of large cities, additional education is quite available. Among the sustainable providers of educational services in the regions can be listed: Center "Third Sector" and School of Young Journalist within the Center, Center for Additional Adult Education "The Studio for Useful Competences", a site "City Life Centre" (Hrodna), Agency for Regional Development "Dziedzič" (Brest), Public Association "Mahiloŭ Women's Center to Support Self-education", Center "Koła" (Mahiloŭ), "Social Projects" (Homiel).

In addition, over the last 2-3 years in the regions, as well as in Minsk there have been development of the so called "spaces", which both become platforms for educational initiatives, and themselves begin to launch educational or awareness-raising projects: Crowdfund-café "Hruntoŭnia" (Brest), Ethno-shop "Cudoŭnia", Art-gallery "Kryha" (Hrodna), Time-club "1387" (Babrujsk).

Over the last 2-3 years, the interest to non-formal education in Belarus has risen again, as well as the number of initiatives and projects offering various educational services. The market for commercial services offering additional education has expanded considerably, and many CSOs are also trying to enter the commercial market with their offer.

The level of influence of CSOs on the state policy in the field of education remains critically low. At the policy level in the field of educational policy in recent years one can note some attempts to influence the changes in the Educational code, the activities of the Independent Bologna Committee, the public campaign on the issue of Belarusian language schools and kindergartens. Quite a wide public discussion was caused by recent initiatives to abolish gymnasiums and other new school reform measures.

Independent trade unions

Today there are only four independent trade unions in Belarus. The Belarusian Independent trade union of Miners, Chemical Workers, Oil-refiners, Energy, Transport, Construction and other Workers (BNP) is the biggest and the most powerful of independent trade unions (comprising about 6,000 workers), the most active are the organizations for the petrochemical plants at JSC "Belaruskali" (Salihorsk), JSC Mazyr Refinery (Mazyr), JSC "Naftan" (Navapolack), JSC "Hrodna Azot" (Hrodna), "Belshyna" (Babrujsk).

The Belarusian Trade Union of Radio-Electronic Industry Workers (REP) has 31 regional organizations and is most active in Homiel, Babrujsk, Brest, Orša and Rečyca. REP trade union is most widely represented in the regions and remains quite active, including information activities, but has its own specifics, because it works more as an NGO than as a trade union. Almost all the primary organizations of the REP trade union in enterprises have been ousted or eliminated, and today the REP trade union carries out its activities without reference to production units.

The Free Trade Union of Belarus (SPB) and the Free Trade Union of Metalworkers (SPM) are in an even more difficult situation.

The activities of free trade unions are more successful in regional centers and large industrial cities: Salihorsk, Mazyr, Navapolack, Hrodna, Brest, Homiel, Babrujsk. The most problematic of the regional centers is Viciebsk. Independent trade unions have been ousted from Minsk enterprises for a long time, only a few groups remain.

In the quantitative and qualitative dimension of the sector, little has changed in the past three years. The number of workers who are members of independent trade unions remains approximately at the same level, the number of organizations does not change — the last (unsuccessful) attempt to register an independent trade union (entrepreneurs) was made ten years ago.

There is a renewal of trade union activists, new leaders appear, sometimes the change of generations is not conflict-free.

With the overwhelming domination of the official trade unions in terms of the number of members, the activities of independent trade unions are under the constant control of the authorities, pressure on activists and members of independent trade unions does not stop, new forms are being implemented (in addition to the traditional practice of dismissal and non-renewal of contracts, pressure on relatives is being used, one of the new methods — a criminal case for tax evasion, launched in August 2017 against the chairman and accountant of the REP trade union).

The current activities of trade unions are linked to the traditional agenda: resolution of labour disputes, implementation of the collective agreement, legal advice, wage regulation, safety, social package, interaction with other trade unions.

Civil society development

Players who act in the field of civil society development can be divided into three groups:

- 1) Associations and communities with experience in the sector and aiming at developing a thematic segment, or some part of CSOs, allocated not on a thematic basis. The thematic players include such organizations as: Green Network Partnership, Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), business associations. The human rights sector also has its own tools for self-development, but they do not work via the activities of specific organizations (although the Barys Zvozhskau Belarusian Human Rights House performs a similar function), but through special forms of communication and interaction. The Assembly of NGOs of Belarus, International Consortium “EuroBelarus”, “Budźma Biełarusami!” campaign form the agenda for civil society development in somewhat different non-thematic way.

In a sense, this sector may include several other organizations that have a narrower agenda related not entirely to the thematic sector, but to certain aspects of its development: Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), Public Association “ACT”, Public Association “The Belarusian Association of Help for Children and Young Persons with Disabilities”, Association of Life-Long Learning and Enlightenment.

- 2) Service players are organizations specializing in organizational development of the sector, acting as a kind of infrastructure for this development. Unlike the first type, the agenda of these CSOs is determined by the needs of the target groups or donor agencies. organizations of this type are the Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC), Association “Belset anti-AIDS”.
- 3) Donor organizations and development programs that have their own vision and agenda for the development of the CSO sector: International NGO Pact, Forum Syd (Sweden), New Eurasia Foundation, support program of Johannes Rau International Centre for Education and Exchange (IBB).

The organizations are concentrated in Minsk. Among the regional players, the role of organizations with the CSOs development agenda can be claimed by the Center “Third Sector” and a pool of related organizations in Hrodna, YMCA Belarus, Center for Regional Development GDF (Homiel), Center “Koła” (Mahiloŭ).

The sector is slow in changing, among others because it is represented by mature structures. There is some internal dynamics: Office for Democratic Belarus (Brussels) (ODB) has almost lost its influence on the Belarusian field, organizational Development Exchange has stopped its operation; at the same time, Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC), New Eurasia Foundation, Green Network Partnership have built their capacity and increased activities; the rest of the organizations in the sector are rather stable.

The general ideology of the organizations of the sector as a whole has changed: external conditions are pushing to shift the focus from the narrative of democracy and consolidation of efforts to achieve systemic changes to the intensification of non-systemic and non-large-scale changes “here and now”, the development of “entrepreneurial” spirit in public culture and activity. These changes are not conflict-free, they are sometimes interpreted as a “generational change” in the sector, but the division is based on the criteria of approaches and attitudes rather than on generational characteristics.

The main field of activity of the organizations of the sector: monitoring and analysis of the situation in civil society, ensuring organizational development, promotion of the CSOs agenda in the information field, advocacy and lobbying (including changes in legislation on CSOs and general conditions of activity), transfer functions (re-granting).

Today in the field of CSOs organizational development most of the activities are related to such issues as consulting on writing project applications, strategic planning, development of volunteering, informing and increasing the activity of CSOs members.

The link with the target audience in terms of setting a common agenda, the problem of delegating and ensuring real and symbolic support for a wide range of CSOs in lobbying for changes important for the entire third sector or for specific thematic sector remain the main challenge for the sector development.

Another problem area is the CSOs information policy, the weak interest of Belarusian media to the development of civil society beyond the coverage of individual events and bright initiatives.

There is little progress towards dialogue with the state on the development of civil society. Over the last three years, we can note a change only in the level of rhetorics, which is becoming less hostile, an increase in the intensity of some communication formats, but the talk about a general change in the rules of interaction and the conditions for the activities of civil society has not even begun. Communication is still on the level of information exchange, sector organizations react to planned or implemented changes, make their proposals, and that is it.

Social services, working with vulnerable groups

This sector is one of the most largest and diverse in terms of forms and topics of activity. The database of the Bureau of Social Information “Belarus Social” contains information on “more than 7,200 state, public, religious, trade union and commercial organizations of the social sphere of the Republic of Belarus”.¹¹ Sectoral analysis conducted by the Office of European Expertise and Communication (OEEC) in 2015 resulted in completing a list of 500 organizations in the field of social services, including regional offices.¹² The experts of the sector estimate more than a hundred active and sustainable CSOs in Belarus, implementing various activities in the social sphere.

In the most general sense, sector organizations can be divided into: (1) those that provide social services to various groups (the vast majority); (2) those that protect the rights or promote the interests of the target groups; and (3) those, whose aiming at developing the capacity of social organizations themselves, as well as communities and target groups.

¹¹ See: **Database “Belarus Social”**, Bureau of social information: <http://ru.belbsi.by/rights/>.

¹² See: **Analysis of the social services sector of the Republic of Belarus** [in Russian], Office of European Expertise and Communication, 2015: <http://oeeec.by/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Анализ-социального-сектора-полный.pdf>.

We should also consider the large programs and funds that operate in this area, because they largely determine the direction of the sector: USAID, Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund), the Federal government of Germany support programme to Belarus, etc.

In this sector, there is a significant number of GONGOs (Public Association “The Belarusian Republican (nationwide) Youth Union” (BRSM), veterans' organizations) and strongly affiliated with the state public associations (Belarus Red Cross Society (BRC), Belarusian Women's Union). In fact, they are part of the state bodies for the implementation of social policy.

Partially inherited from the Soviet times, partially created at the very beginning of the period of independence of Belarus networks of organizations that deal with different groups of people with disabilities are preserved: Public Association “The Belarusian Association of the Visually Impaired” (BelTIZ), Public Association “The Belarusian Society of the Disabled”, Public Association “The Belarusian Society of the Deaf”, Public Association “The Belarusian Association for Children and Young Persons with disabilities”, Public Association “Nationwide Association of Wheelchair Users”. The Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is actively working to promote the rights of people with disabilities.

Social issues are the focus of many gender organizations (“Gender Perspectives”, YWCA Belarus, Public Association “Radzistava”).

Thanks to the work of the Global Fund, a network of organizations working on a range of issues related to the fight against AIDS and drug addiction has been created and developed: Belarusian Public Association “Positive Movement”, Nationwide Youth Public Association “Your Chance”, Nationwide Youth Public Association “Vstrecha”, YMCA Belarus, etc., grouped within the Association “BelSet anti-AIDS”.

Other associations, such as the Public Association “The Belarusian Association of Social Workers”, also play a significant role.

In recent years, new initiatives have emerged aiming at working with the elderly: The Centre for Active Longevity operates in Minsk, there is a development of Third age universities.

Organizations working with topics that had not been raised as separate issues before started to emerge: Social and Awareness Raising institution Center for support to cancer patients “In the Name of Life” (improving the quality of life of cancer patients), Center for Children's Development “Levania” (inclusion in education), Social and Awareness Raising Institution “International Center “Donation, Dialysis, Transplantation”, etc.

In addition, there are quite a lot of charity organizations and foundations in Belarus: these are organization of different origin (International Charitable Public Association “UniHelp”, International Charitable Fund for Children “Chance”, International Charitable Fund “Dobra tut”), and religious organizations and institutions (Religious Mission “Charitable Catholic Society CARITAS”, Public Charitable Jewish Association “Hesed-Rahamim”, etc.). Separately, one should note International Public Association “Mutual Understanding” (“Vzaimoponimaniye”), that acts as the Belarusian operator of a number of programs and payments to former prisoners and victims of Nazism by German and European organizations and funds.

Minsk is the center of major initiatives, but at the level of regional centers and medium-sized cities there is a quite well developed system of regional offices of large organizations and associations. These organizations are active at the regional level: Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs, Belarus Red Cross Society (BRC). There are a number of independent organizations at the regional level in this area: “Golden Age University” program (Hrodna), Homiel Association of Children and Youth (Homiel), Mahiloŭ Women's Center for Support and Self-Education (Mahiloŭ), Public Association “Business Women's Club” (Brest), Viciebsk City Public Association of Women “Juliana” and

Nationwide Youth Public Association “Vstrecha” (Viciebsk), Private Social Charitable Institution for help to cancer patients “Center “Meridian of Hope” (Homiel), etc.

The internal dynamics of the sector is largely determined by the directions of social policy, which are prioritized by state bodies (due to the dominance of the state in the social sector). Another rather strong factor influencing the sector's development is growing system of paid social services. Another factor, although less frequent, is related to international priorities (the main one today is connected with sustainable development goals).

In quantitative terms, the sector is growing precisely due to the emergence of new social service providers, although new representative, membership-based organizations practically do not arise.

As for the topics of the sector's work, there are a number of problems and areas in which the majority of efforts are traditionally concentrated: the needs of people with disabilities, assistance to children and families in difficult situations, the fight against alcoholism, drug addiction, HIV/AIDS, poverty. Among the topics that have been developing over the last three years we can note the agenda for working with the elderly. Initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life of the elderly, including educational ones, began to develop (here we can mention the Festival of Third Age Universities which was held in May 2018). Popular areas are social entrepreneurship and social economy, employment of people with disabilities and employment in general. Another relatively new phenomenon became the emergence of issues related to mental disability and autism on the agenda of both state and nonstate actors. The infrastructure of care for the elderly, people with chronic or severe diseases, people with disabilities is slowly developing.

Urban development and urban studies

Urbanism is a relatively new area of activity, and this sector is very different in composition and structure from traditional CSOs sectors. Nevertheless, the development of urban environment and infrastructure is gradually becoming a separate area. Active participants of the sector include the Research and Educational Initiative “Minsk Urban Platform” and its Almanac “Urban Tactics”, Belarus Architecture Students Association (BASA), the initiator of the annual Minsk Architectural Forum, Public Campaign “General Plan — for Minsk residents!”.

A number of environmental organizations and initiatives are also actively working with the topic “the city”: Institution “Center for Environmental Solutions”, Public Environmental Movement “Green Watch”, Civic Campaign “City Forester”, Green Network Partnership, as well as Public Association “Minsk Bicycle Society”, Public Association “The Belarusian Association of Experts and Surveyors in Transport”.

Special infrastructure role is played by the emerging platforms for e-petitions: Zvarot.by, “Comfortable city” (Petitions.by), as well as projects like “My City” (115.бел).

Elements of this sector development include the development of public spaces: IMAGURU, “Staŭoŭka”, CECH, Contemporary Art Gallery “Ź”, Cultural Center “Corpus”, Cultural Hub “OK16”, SPACE, etc., which act not only as venues for events, but also have their own programs for urban life, as well as the emergence and development of urban websites (CityDog.by, “How to live here”, etc.).

Of course, the level of urban activity in Minsk is incomparably higher than outside the capital. However, regional centers see emergence of similar processes. The centers of that accumulate initiatives focused on urban development are such organizations as: Center for Regional Development GDF (Homiel), Initiative “Center for Urban Initiatives” and Center “Kofa” (Mahiloŭ), Cultural and Awareness-Raising Establishment “Center for urban projects and initiatives “Prastora” (Viciebsk), Regional Development Agency “Dziedzič” (Brest). Public spaces are being on the rise: Crowdfund-café “Hruntoŭnia” (Brest), Ethno-shop “Cudoŭnia”, Art-gallery “Kryha” (Hrodna), Time-club “1387” (Babrujsk). Such initiatives as Information and Awareness-Rising Establishment “For Velo Brest”

or Public Association of Cyclists “VelaHrodna” are being developed, while communities of cyclists emerge in Lida, Kobryn, Salihorsk. Following the example of an online magazine about Minsk CityDog.by and in addition to traditional urban websites, there are genuine urban online publications, for example, the online magazine about Brest “Binoculars” (binkl.by).

The dynamics of urban activity in Minsk over the past 3-5 years is quite high. The main thematic areas in which public organizations and initiatives operate can be summarized as follows: construction and everything related; green spaces and urban ecology; transport infrastructure, investment in the development of the city; urban lifestyle and infrastructure of free time. Active development of portals Zvarot.by, Petitions.by and “My city” (115.бел) allows feedback mechanisms for the urban community to be included in the solution of current problems.¹³

There is a significant increase of the number and activities of public spaces, city festivals and events of different thematic focus and scale, including: Queer Film Festival “Dotyk”, Eco-festival “Pasternak”, Street Art Festival “Vulica Brasil”, Minsk Forum of Street Theaters, etc.

In the last year, more and more activity begins to focus around the concept of “smart city”. There is an increased interest in new technological solutions in the organization of urban infrastructure, as well as the use of open data in these processes (in particular the Open Data Belarus community is active in promoting this topic).

One of the development problems of the vector related to public discussions and increase of citizens' participation in decision-making is the low level of dialogue culture of both from the side of Belarusian officials and local residents defending their own interests. If the level of citizens mobilization for participation in the process of public discussions has increased significantly, all parties of the process still lack the ability and desire to negotiate, to seek compromises, to coordinate positions. This often leads to conflicts not only with opponents (officials or business), but also within civil society.

Ecology

The sector of environmental organizations is not very large, although it is very active. The long-running system organizations among the organizations of the sector: APB-BirdLife Belarus, Public Association “Ekohome”, Green Network Partnership, Center for Environmental Solutions. These are organizations that operate international programs of sustainable development: “Ecoproject Partnership” (“Ecopartnership”), Local Foundation “Interaction”. There is also a number of niche organizations, the most active of which are: Public Association “Bahna”, Environmental Institution “Agro-Eco-Culture”, Public Association “Minsk Bicycle Society” and other initiatives of the cycling community.

The largest organizations are concentrated in Minsk, the most active of the regional organizations are: Environmental Regional Public Association “Nierush” (Baranavičy), International Environmental Public Association “ENDO” (Mahiloŭ), Homiel Association of Children and Youth (Homiel), International Foundation for Rural Development “Vozrozhdeniye-agro” (Słauharad), Brest Youth Public Association “Vremia zemli” (Brest), Local Environmental Fund “For Clean Prypiač”, Regional Environmental Public Association “Jasielda”. Recently, within the framework of the Green Network Partnership, the “Green Watch” initiative has been developing, also working at the regional level.

¹³ See: **The Project Petitions.by. How not to be thought of as a crazy townie** [in Russian], Naviny.by, 23.03.2016: https://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2016/03/23/ic_articles_116_191260; **Solution to the problem**, My city: <http://115.бел>.

5-6 years ago, there was quite a significant growth in the sector, if not in terms of the number of registered organizations, but at least in terms of the growth of activity and the number of activists. Now the sector has reached a certain “plateau”, it undergoes a certain stabilization.

Traditional sector organizations agenda is: climate and energy; waste and sustainable use of resources; access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters (implementation of the principles of the Aarhus Convention), organic agriculture, water resources. In recent years, the intensity of work with the anti-nuclear topic has increased and subsequently with the topic of persecution of environmental activists.

Another trend is related to environmentally friendly lifestyle. In this regard, educational initiatives such as the environmental project “Green University” or “Eka-Majsternia” are developing. The media component of the sector has grown significantly: in addition to the web sites of organizations there are such successful Internet resources as “Green Portal” (GreenBelarus.Info), web site of the Institution “Center for Environmental Solutions” (Ecoidea.by).

Even having high degree of activity and motivation of environmental activists, attempts to consolidate the efforts of organizations and develop a common strategy have not been successful. The level of consolidation within the sector itself is considered unsatisfactory. Public engagement, expansion of work at the local level, development of the social base of the environmental movement remain another set of problems recognized in the sector.

An additional challenge to the sector is the redistribution of international programmes resources, priority given by European and American donors and development funds to the work with the state. This encourages the creation of GONGOs, which are a resource-generating tool, and reduces the influence and capacity of independent environmental organizations.

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