

THE SPHERE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS IN BELARUS BEFORE AND AFTER 2020

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Abstract

The article deals with the development of non-governmental public organizations (NGOs) in the Republic of Belarus. Since 2020 the development of civil society organizations has been taking place in the context of a growing political, economic and social crisis. The change in attitudes towards the non-governmental sector resulted in the closure of a large number of NGOs, which led to a total reformatting of the working conditions of the non-governmental sector in the country. Since the reasons for this transformation lie deep behind the events of 2020, changes in the work of civil society organizations will also have long-term consequences.

Introduction

Informal and formal groups of people united on the basis of common interests to achieve common goals exist in any political and economic system. However, in a democracy or during the period of democratization of society they are of particular importance. Numerous voluntary associations of people united as a rule for non-commercial purposes in public associations are an obvious manifestation of freedom. The active growth and further development of the sphere of public associations in the Republic of Belarus is an indicator of the level of development of civil society and a kind of barometer of its relationship with the authorities. Year 2020 is an important milestone in this relationship in Belarus.

Development of the NGO sphere in Belarus until 2020

In accordance with the data of the Ministry of Justice, at the beginning of 2022 15 political parties, 25 trade unions, 2978 public associations (226 international, 785

republican and 1967 local), 45 unions (associations) of public associations, 227 foundations and 7 republican state - public associations were registered in Belarus. Official data show that in 2021, 36 new public associations, 3 new unions of public associations and 7 new foundations were registered. (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus, 2022) A year earlier, another 84 new public associations were registered, including 3 international, 8 republican and 73 local. (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus, 2021) The official data for the last two years, showing only the number of registered organizations and does not show a broader picture of statistics in this area. Nevertheless, in the data of the National Statistical Committee one can see that the general number of public associations in 2021 decreased by 43 organizations. Thus, 2021 has become an obvious turning point in the trend in the development of the sphere of non-profit public organizations.

The total number of Belarusian non-governmental organizations of various legal forms remained more or less stable during the first decade of the 21st century - Figure 1. In the period from 2003 to 2010, there were about 2.2 thousand of them. Since 2011, there has been a period of a kind of renaissance for the sphere of public associations. As a result, by 2021 their total number has increased by almost 36%, thus the increase was about 800 public organizations. (Belarusian National Statistical Committee, 2021)

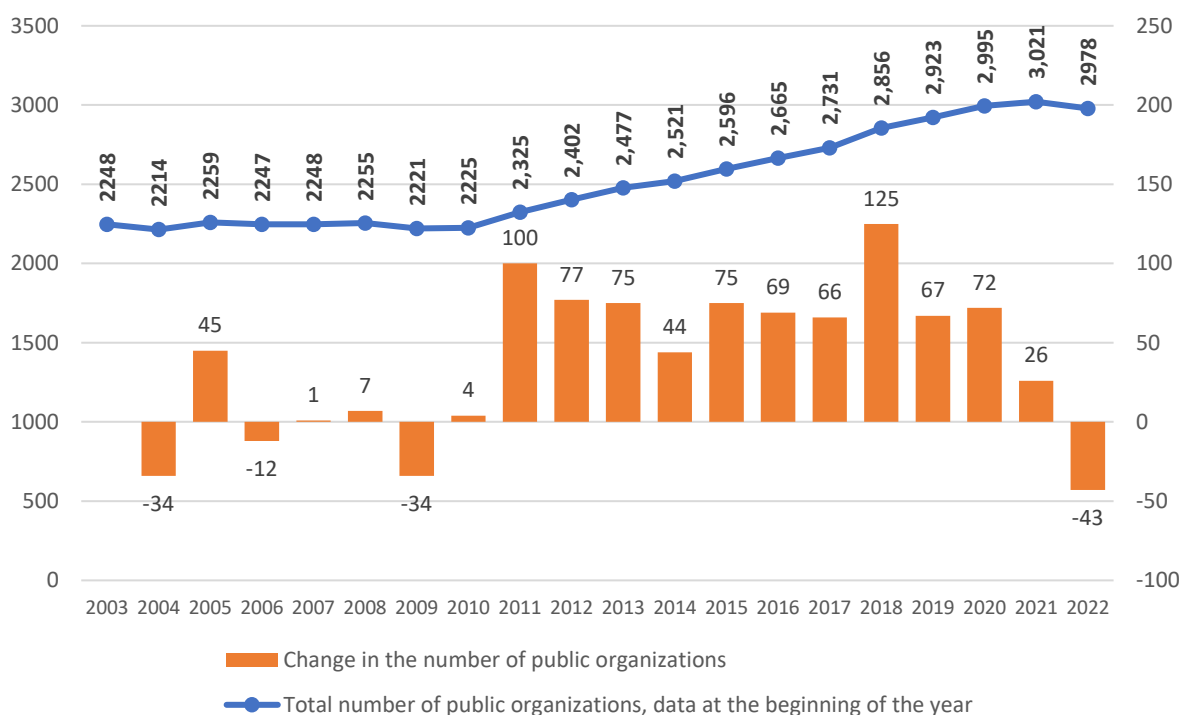


Figure 1 - Dynamics of the number of public registered public organizations in Belarus

(Source: Belarusian National Statistical Committee)

One of the obvious reasons for the change in trends in the field of public organizations was the growing turbulence in the Belarusian economy - Figure 2. During 2011 a long-term negative trade balance and the costs of the administrative-command system of the economy resulted in a serious economic crisis. The sharp surge in demand for foreign currency and the increase in wages in previous years before the next electoral campaign significantly undermined the strength of the national economy. As a result, the economy faced a sharp increase in inflation, public debt and the instability of the dynamics of the gross domestic product.

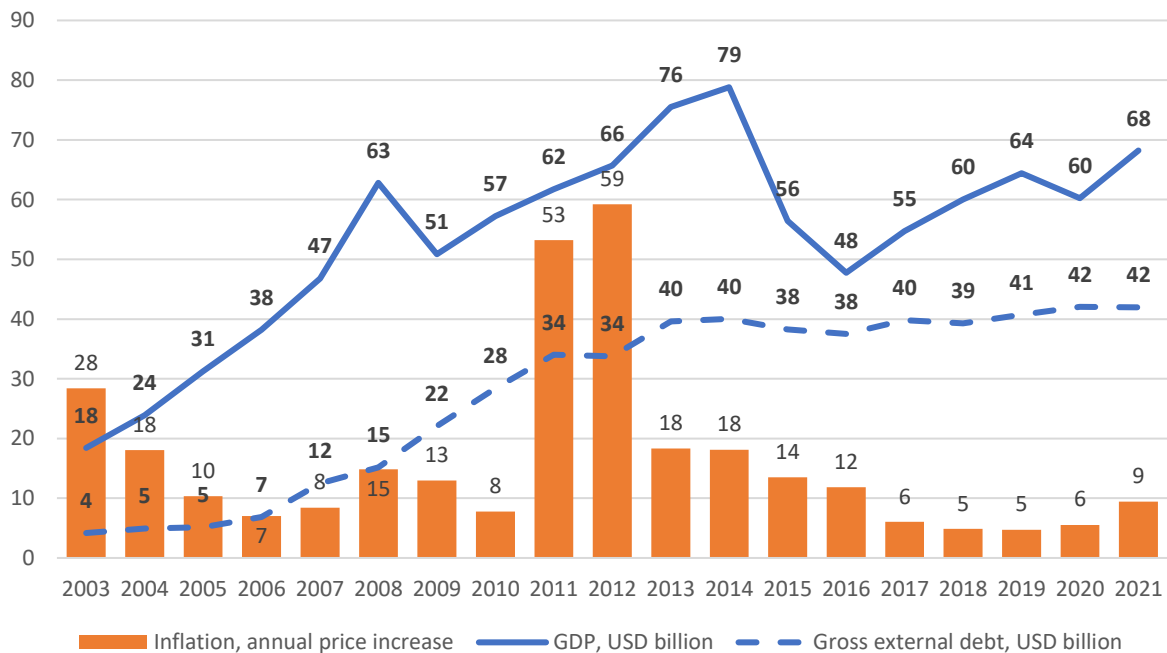


Figure 2 - Dynamics of macroeconomic indicators of the development of Belarus

(Source: Belarusian National Statistical Committee)

Inflationary and devaluation processes have led to a revision of economic policy in the country. Against the background of the economic crisis, financial contradictions with the main economic partner, the Russian Federation, demonstrated the need to diversify the attraction of funds to the country. However, in order to attract foreign capital, it became obvious that it was necessary to demonstrate changes in the country in order to improve relations with Western countries. Thus, the trends in the field of public

associations after the crisis of 2011 combined the interests of both society and the state. A more clearly expressed desire for the consolidation of interests, mutual assistance and improving the quality of life without paternalism appeared in society. The state, in turn, needed to demonstrate the improvement in the state of rights and freedoms in the country in order to increase investment attractiveness. Despite the fact that in 2011 the funds to maintain the state of the economy were provided by the Russian Federation through the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development, the need to diversify the sources of supporting economic growth was obvious due to a series of scandals and contradictions when agreeing on financing from the Russian side.

Further changes in the state's attitude towards the NGO sphere went hand in hand with the general transformation of international relations. As a result of the events of 2014, which led to a protracted crisis between Russia and Ukraine, Belarus managed to establish a dialogue with the warring parties, and against this background, achieved a reduction in sanctions pressure from the US and the EU. The “warming” of relations between the state and the sphere of non-governmental organizations has become a trend of a general improvement in the self-awareness of the civil sector. The assessment of the sustainability of civil society has improved, donor policies have been reoriented and the number of international projects implemented by NGOs in cooperation with government bodies has significantly increased in Belarus. This became especially noticeable at the local level, where the implementation of international projects made it possible to approach the solution of extremely important problems, primarily social and environmental ones.

Since 2012, the following trends have been observed in the field of NGOs:

- reorientation of NGO activities in the direction of cooperation with state bodies and local authorities;
- increasing the importance of internal resources for the development of NGOs through the mechanisms of crowdfunding, crowdsourcing;
- development of social entrepreneurship mechanisms and promotion of ideas of corporate social responsibility;
- increased activity of foreign NGOs in cooperation with Belarusian colleagues;
- growth in the number of NGOs in the form of institutions;

- the growth of NGO events aimed at attracting the attention of the media and the public to the organizers and problems of the NGO being solved. (Chausov, 2017)

These trends were observed despite the extremely unfavorable legal conditions for the creation and operation of public organizations both at the level of legislation and at the level of practice. The legislation retained a ban on the activities of public associations without state registration. For violation of the established procedure, criminal liability was provided. The procedure for registering public associations remained complex compared to other countries in the region, but even after its passage did not guarantee a positive outcome. According to experts working in the field of NGOs, the registration authorities considered this issue not in the legal, but in the political plane, and it was easier to register only those organizations whose existence was recognized by the state as politically safe and expedient.

Despite frequent refusals to register, obstacles in the full implementation of activities, the sphere of NGOs in Belarus experienced rapid development in the second decade of the 21st century. Even with the fact that financial flows have been restructured in favor of state and proto-state structures, NGOs have begun to adapt, changing their fundraising tactics and redirecting the focus of their activities to cooperation projects with the state to solve problems, especially at the local level. It brought success. The state encouraged solving problems at the local level for which funds were not in the budget, including through the creation of quasi-state NGOs to simulate public participation in the implementation of the local level project.

The state itself has become the biggest beneficiary of improved relations with the NGO sector. Extremely capital-intensive international projects were implemented with the support of the NGO sector in the areas of education, health and ecology. In the face of deteriorating budget financing opportunities, this has become a significant support for the development of regions and the solution of many social and environmental problems, and has made it possible to improve the material and technical base of educational and healthcare institutions.

The example is the European Union assistance programs and cooperation between Belarus and the EU as part of the implementation of the neighborhood and partnership instrument in 2007-2013. Belarus has been allocated 71.6 million euros for programs and projects in the field of energy efficiency, ecology, standardization, medicine, and regional development. Under the EU cross-border cooperation programs

Poland-Ukraine-Belarus, Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus and the Baltic Sea Region, projects with a total budget of about 55 million euros have been implemented in Belarus. Belarus has taken an active part in the EU thematic programs TEMPUS, ERASMUS MUNDUS and others. Starting from 2016 the annual country budget of EU technical assistance for Belarus has been doubled (up to 30 million euros). (EU ITS Center in the Republic of Belarus, 2021)

On the other hand, the projects were beneficial for European partners as well. The European Union was interested in the transit possibilities of Belarus. This applies not only to transport services for the free movement of goods, but also to the stability of pipeline services to ensure reliable energy supplies. In the context of tensions related to the problem of refugees and illegal migration to the EU, the issue of border cooperation played a special role for the EU in Belarus. In 2014 negotiations began between the Republic of Belarus and the European Union to conclude agreements on visa facilitation and readmission. At the beginning of 2020, in Brussels, Belarus and the EU signed agreements on visa facilitation and readmission of persons staying without permission. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2022) Cooperation in the border built on the basis of the Memorandum on establishing practical cooperation between the State Border Committee and the European Agency for the Protection of External Borders FRONTEX was signed in 2009. At the expense of EU funds, the state border of Belarus was improved, the national border and customs infrastructure was modernized.

The change in the attitude of the authorities and public organizations has led from a policy of rejection of public initiatives to moderate cooperation. Even the trend towards soft Belarusianization began to be perceived positively by the state - the active dissemination and propaganda of the national Belarusian culture. The state saw this as an opportunity, on the one hand, for the consolidation of society, fearing the growth of pro-Russian sentiments in society, on the other hand, strengthening the Western vector of cooperation, speculating on the topic of growing Russian influence.

The development of the NGO sphere in the period leading up to 2020 allowed expanding cooperation between society and the state in the areas of ecology, gender issues, education and science. Many projects have become possible due to the fact that Belarus has become a participant in the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative. At the initiative of Belarus, the Eastern Partnership Business Forum (2011) and the Eastern

Partnership Working Group on Harmonization of Digital Markets (2015) were created as platforms for dialogue and cooperation between business circles and economic structures of partner countries and the EU. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2022)

The development of cooperation was greatly facilitated by the state's interest in promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Since for Belarus this agenda was devoid of political overtones, it became a reliable basis for interaction between the authorities and public organizations. A wide range of projects were implemented as part of the achievement of the sustainable development goals, from large ones that covered all regions of Belarus to those that contributed to solving development problems at the local level. Through the mechanisms for achieving sustainable development goals, foreign donors contributed to the interaction between the authorities and public organizations. For example, the main goal of the Support Program for Belarus of the German Federal Government (stage 9) was to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Belarus by strengthening the capacity and competencies, primarily of civil society organizations, as well as through strengthening cooperation between government bodies, business and civil society. (Belarus Support Program 2019–2022, 2018) This program purposefully continued its long-term efforts to support Belarusian initiatives in the field of sustainable development and, in accordance with the principles of the 2030 Agenda, was focused on achieving greater synergy between its thematic areas. Through this program the Federal Government of Germany was able to assist the work of more than 600 joint German-Belarusian partnership projects, which, since the late 1980s, have been conducting joint multifaceted activities to eliminate the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, solve social and economic problems, and also establish mutual understanding between Germany and the Republic of Belarus.

The development of multilateral contacts between Belarusian NGOs and foreign partners was facilitated by the easing of the visa regime in Belarus. Since 2017, a visa-free procedure for entry into the Republic of Belarus through airports for up to 30 days has been established for citizens of 76 states. In addition, in order to intensify cross-border cooperation, the entry of foreign citizens into a number of territories of the Brest and Grodno regions for tourism purposes was simplified for up to fifteen days. These steps gave impetus to public organizations associated with promoting the development

of cultural and historical potential, small businesses in the regions and environmental initiatives.

An important feature of the development of the NGO sphere was expressed, among other things, in the development of a new mechanism for attracting funds for this sphere - crowdfunding. On the one hand, the growth in the well-being of citizens contributed to the attraction of funds for charity and social projects. On the other hand, NGOs were actively showing interest in new forms of funding. The scale of projects financed through crowdfunding expand. The collected funds supported the activities of public organizations, implemented publishing projects (books, films, cartoons), funded educational seminars and conferences, created public start-ups and even raised funds to send athletes to international competitions. Nevertheless, the amounts raised in Belarus through the crowdfunding mechanism were not comparable in volume with the amounts of international technical assistance or foreign gratuitous assistance. For Belarusian NGOs, international technical assistance and foreign gratuitous assistance remained the main source of funding for both maintaining their activities and implementing projects.

In addition to new ways to raise funds for projects and support the activities of NGOs, civil society organizations actively used a wide range of tools to promote the ideas and goals of civil society. First of all we are talking about new formats of working with target audiences - various hackathons, eduthons and other forms of creative work. In addition, this is a more active inclusion of new means of communication with the audience based on social networks, applications and other ideas related to the IT field. In addition, until 2020 NGOs used the state-owned media as a tool to a limited extent. As a result the state media had an increase in audience and NGOs had a wider information coverage, especially in that part of the population where there are no active users of modern media.

The growth in the number of NGO projects, their effectiveness and recognition was facilitated by the development of IT sector in Belarus. By combining intellectual and educational potential the IT sector has become an important donor of financial and creative resources for many NGOs. Public organizations have become producers of social environment that was in demand by people in this part of the economy. A large number of people employed in IT who have gained experience in international cooperation, a

competitive market, an open economy. The emergence of inclusive cafes, corporate social responsibility, educational open programs were the result of the work of NGOs to create a familiar environment for the new IT class of the Belarusian society.

NGOs in 2020

The events of 2020 in Belarus, unfolding against the backdrop of electoral campaign, have become a milestone for the history of the country. Society and the state have become so politicized and split in terms of values. Public organizations were by that time an important and visible part of civil society and were affected by the whirlpool of events.

With regard to the NGO sphere and its role in the events of 2020, it is important to analyze several aspects. Firstly, public organizations, for the most part, were not direct participants in political activity in the country. This was both a consequence of the actual ban on active political activity in the country and the distancing of the NGOs themselves from the near-political agenda of work. This was a kind of self-censorship for the possibility of continuing to function as part of the legal civil field. Secondly, the activities of NGOs in Belarus by that time had already contributed to the formation of stable horizontal ties, the work of which became an important driver of the political activity of citizens. Thanks to a large number of NGO projects a demand has been formed in society for active actions to achieve socially significant goals. Moreover, the participation of the state was no longer required in solving these problems. NGOs in Belarus until 2020 have played an important role in reducing paternalism in the Belarusian society. And it was not a goal. This effect was a by-product of increased civic engagement. Taking into account the peculiarities of the socio-economic development of Belarus, such titanic shifts, being not very visible, came into conflict with the values inherited from the command-administrative model of managing the economy and the state. In the absence of an independent sociology the state was unable to see this trend and offer society an adequate response to the new challenges of the time.

The peculiarity of the socio-economic development of Belarus in 2020 was the simultaneous action of several unfavorable factors for the state at once. Firstly, the epidemiological situation caused, on the one hand, serious problems in the functioning of the national economy, and on the other hand, revealed problems in the development of

the state healthcare system. In an environment of chaotic state measures in counteracting Covid-19, or often their complete absence, public organizations were able to demonstrate the effective cohesive work of horizontal ties in society in crisis situations. Secondly, the economic shocks caused by regular contradictions between Russia and Belarus in the energy sector resulted in budget losses due to the limitation of oil supplies to Belarusian refineries. This led to a reduction in the revenue sources of the Belarusian budget and once again demonstrated the dependence of the national economy on non-economic ties between Russia and Belarus. Thirdly, the growth of politicization and disunity in society has become a challenge for the public administration system. Public organizations by that time knew how to establish a dialogue with society, then state structures clearly lacked this.

The active participation of public organizations followed not before the electoral campaign, but after it. Then society needed lawyers, doctors, psychologists and volunteer initiatives.

NGO sphere after August 2020

For the civil society sector 2020 has become an important milestone for two reasons. Firstly, after the next electoral campaign, the process of mass liquidation of public associations and the persecution of individual activists began. Secondly, the processes in society that manifested themselves during the critical period became evidence of an important achievement in the work of the non-state sphere - the creation of stable horizontal ties in society, the reduction of paternalism and the understanding of the importance of the rights and freedoms of the general population.

According to the Belarusian research center Lawtrend from the end of 2020 to February 2022, 366 non-profit organizations in Belarus are in the process of forced liquidation, including litigation or forcibly excluded from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities or Individual Entrepreneurs, another 223 have decided on independent liquidation. (Lawtrend, 2022) A common ground for dissolving public associations, as before, was that the association or its leadership or members are engaged in «extremist» activities. In 2021 and 2022, the practice of forced liquidation of institutions under the simplified system resumed. Under such a system, the decision on liquidation is made by the registration authority without a court decision. A significant number of active

participants and leaders of public associations were imprisoned or convicted. The activities of a large number of third sector organizations have been declared destructive and banned as extremist.

Based on independent estimates of the decline in the number of public associations in Belarus over the past two years the number of NGO has dropped to the level of 2012. An analysis of the change in the structure of public associations from 2010 to 2021 shows that youth and sports organizations accounted for the growth in the number of NGOs registered in the form of public associations - Figure 3. Moreover, the number of the latter doubled during the period under review. From 2021, we should expect a decrease in almost all types of NGOs, since various public organizations have felt pressure, sometimes even those whose activities were far from the socio-political agenda or even solving social problems, for example, those involved in the protection of birds in Belarus. But since such NGOs were large beneficiaries of foreign financial support (especially in the field of ecology, culture, education, nature protection), this very circumstance probably caused the suspension of their activities. Thus, the distancing of public associations from political issues in their activities did not ultimately become an obstacle during the period of large-scale liquidation of NGOs in Belarus.

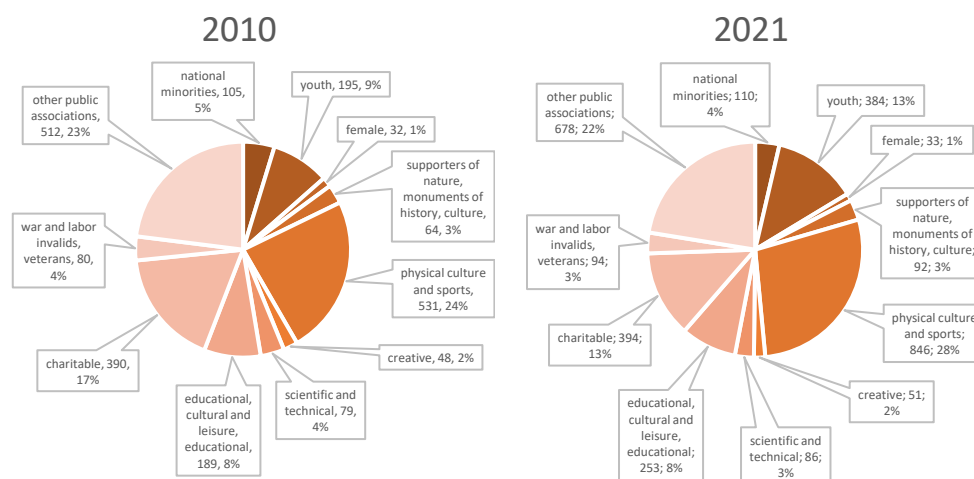


Figure 3 - Structure of public organizations of Belarus by areas of their activity

(Source: Belarusian National Statistical Committee)

Many Belarusian public organizations were forced after 2020 to suspend their activities and stop implementing projects. Many employees and activists have gone abroad. Nevertheless, some public associations find opportunities to continue their active

work both in the country or even in conditions of relocation. Support for the work of NGOs in the new conditions is provided by foreign partners. The European Union has allocated an additional 30 million euros for Belarusian youth, independent media, small and medium-sized enterprises forced to leave the country, and cultural figures. (Ursula von der Leyen, 2021) At the same time the EU revised its assistance to Belarus, completely refusing to cooperate with the authorities at the national level, gradually increasing sanctions pressure and other restrictive measures.

The United States also provides support to the Belarusian sphere of NGOs on an increased scale. The US House Appropriations Committee has approved an increase in international aid for civil society in Belarus from \$11 million to \$30 million. These funds are directed to the civil society of Belarus and independent media for the observance of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Belarus.

Support for the activities of Belarusian NGOs and the new format of their work has influenced the list of possible tools that they use. Most of the traditional formats of work with face-to-face participation have become possible only outside of Belarus, primarily for representatives of the diaspora. At the same time, for links with the Belarusian agenda, NGOs are building up new communication through social networks, Internet and horizontal connections between activists who have remained in the country.

The change in the nature of the work of the NGO sphere in Belarus since 2020 is accompanied by a reformatting of the attitude towards this area on the part of the state. The new official position is that the authorities "will continue to cooperate with non-state public organizations that benefit the state and society, in contrast to organizations that are destructive in their opinion, whose activities should be stopped." At the same time, a number of pro-government public organizations, such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, want to take over the functions of some non-profit organizations that have been liquidated. In this case, the resumption of cooperation between foreign partners of closed NGOs with a reorientation towards pro-state public associations or new quasi-state NGOs with new funding under the current conditions seems unlikely.

Conclusions

The state of the sphere of public organizations in Belarus after 2020 should be characterized as a crisis. Institutional changes and practice of the NGO work in Belarus

not only reduced the potential of this sphere, but radically reformatted the conditions for its functioning. This state of affairs is aggravated by the continuation of the socio-economic crisis in Belarus, the growing sanctions pressure and the increasing involvement of Belarus in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In such conditions, the problems that many public organizations of Belarus have been working on are obviously aggravated and, consequently, the demand for the activities of NGOs (for example, social support, the growth of environmental risks) is sharply increasing in society. On the other hand, the opportunities for the activities of NGOs in Belarus are reduced to the actual freezing of any activity in the country.

At the same time the sphere of public organizations in Belarus is undergoing a qualitative shift. The deterioration of working conditions within the country and the intensification of work outside is becoming a new reality for the organization of this sphere. In the context of the detachment of relocated organizations from the current Belarusian context, many organizations nevertheless participate in the formation of horizontal ties of the Belarusian diaspora. In the future, we should expect further consolidation of the activities of public organizations operating outside the country with the formation of regional clusters (Vilnius, Warsaw, Tbilisi, etc.). At the same time, improving the conditions for the activities of public organizations in Belarus will depend entirely on the development of the socio-economic and political crisis.

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