

Chapter. Civil society, social movements and political changes in Belarus in 2020 and after

The aim of this chapter is to explore how civil society organisations (CSOs) and social movements in Belarus mobilised in 2020 and what role they play in the mass protests and other dramatic political events which unfolded there, and which continue to shape their activities. In some respects this was an unexpected development as civil society and social movements in Belarus and other post-Soviet and post-Communist societies had for many years been seen within the dominant research narrative as relatively weak and marginalized (Morje-Howard 2003; Narozhna 2004). Yet as Jacobsson and Koloczuk (2020) argue, a reassessment of post-socialist civil society is long overdue and there is a need to investigate the newer hybrid forms of formal and informal activism and organisation seen in many countries and contexts across Central and Eastern Europe. These differ from the more ‘NGO-ized’ model of civil society which dominated until the 2010s and was often criticised for being elitist and out of touch with the needs of the people it claimed to represent. In many respects the ways in which previously existed Belarusian civil society organisations and newly emerged social movement organisations mobilised existing activists and new members and participated in both large and small-scale protests against the incumbent regime from 2020 onwards are important to be analysed.

We begin the chapter by defining the concepts of civil society and social movements and explaining the framework of the research. Then we describe the Belarusian political context and the events of 2020 which became grounds for changes in mobilisation practices in the country. Next, we briefly investigate the situation within Belarusian civil society which existed before the presidential election in August 2020 and show the dynamic it developed after the protest events which followed this election. We focus in particular on the newly emerged social movements and grassroots organisations which mushroomed just after the election and the extensive repression the authorities used against both previously existing organised civil society organisations (CSOs) and newly established initiatives. Finally, we reflect on the current situation in Belarusian civil society with reference to the newly emerged tragic context of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Defining ‘civil society’

Civil society, an area of activity long targeted by Lukashenka in his attempt to side-line alternative and critical voices, has traditionally been seen as encompassing a wide range of formal and informal organisations including community and grassroots groups; trade unions; professional bodies; NGOs; and social enterprises (Edwards 2004). It involves citizens acting collectively to achieve certain goals, make demands on the state and hold the state accountable. It functions as a sector of organized social and public life which is autonomous from the state and the market but also crucially from the political system and is more focused seeking concessions or redress from the state than trying to win formal power (Diamond 1994).

A robust and independent civil society is seen as a key element in mobilizing citizens at all stages of the process of successful democratisation (Diamond 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996), although this is one among many factors involved in the democratisation process (Doowon 2006). Social movements are seen as forming part of civil society (Edwards 2004) and the two types of organisation are often seen as interchangeable in the wider political and media discourse, yet they perform somewhat different functions and have different aims and tactics.

While civil society is based around cooperative ties which foster mutual trust, shared values and social cohesion (Putnam 1993) and seeks to be autonomous from the state and the political system, social movements are disruptive, transgressive and seek to put pressure on decision-makers and play an active role in the political process by using unconventional forms of political participation (Tarrow 1989; Della Porta 2020).

Where civil society organisations tend to operate in the ‘third sector’ as structured NGOs, social movements are seen as informal networks which transcend the boundaries of any specific organisation and share a strong common identity. They use protest politics (mobilizing for protest events in the public sphere) and information politics (collecting and deploying credible information) to draw public attention to their cause (Keck and Sikkink 1998), and are seen as a variant of what Tilly and Tarrow (2015) call ‘contentious politics.’ While studies of social movements have long focused on developments within established democracies, more recently scholars have begun to highlight the fact that social movements are a normal feature of life in contemporary authoritarian regimes too and that they have the potential under certain circumstances to challenge illiberal systems of governance, extract policy concessions and contribute to democratization (Chen and Moss 2019; Lorentzen 2013).

In terms of how civil society and social movements are analysed, many studies address them as separate phenomena, although some scholars have explored the links between them in the context of green politics and antiracist protests in Western European and North American countries (e.g. Barry and Doherty 2001; Ruzza 2008). As Della Porta (2020) points out, the distinction between the two phenomena has become increasingly blurred and there are plenty of interactions between them: civil society organisations participate in protest campaigns and membership of the two types of organisations often overlaps. Civil society organisations can become politicized and sometimes morph into social movement organisations. Furthermore, social movements have triggered the development of civil society organisations as a means of survival in the lull after intense moments of protest have died down – something which relates directly to the case of Belarus as the waves of protest have ebbed and flowed since August 2020 in the face of intense repression. As a result, rather than analysing the two phenomena as separate entities, exploring the existing and potential interactions between social movement studies and civil society studies could lead to a better understanding of recent empirical developments (Della Porta 2020), including in countries such as Belarus which have experienced mass mobilization of the population against the incumbent regime.

The Belarusian context

Prior to the events of 2020, civil society organisations and social movements in Belarus were largely seen as weak and marginal in terms of their social base (Terzyan 2020). This was partly due to certain structural and historical factors which scholars also observed in other post-communist and post-Soviet societies such as low levels of social cohesion, trust in institutions and low engagement in political processes as a legacy of state socialism (Morje-Howard 2003; Narozhna 2004). It was also, however, due to Lukashenka’s relentless efforts since coming to power in 1994 to eliminate sources of opposition to his regime and use the instruments of state repression against his political opponents, the independent press and civil society organisations (Silitski 2010) while offering a ‘social contract’ to the population which for many years provided broad social support and extensive state subsidies to the majority of Belarusians without the kind of mass privatization and economic ‘shock therapy’ experienced by

neighbouring countries (Marple 2006). Yet, it should be mentioned that in spite of the hostile political environment in the country and the lack of mass civic participation, civil society organisations (or organised civil society) not only existed in Belarus but also performed a lot of important social functions including advocacy, the provision of social services and organisational development of their own (CSOs Sustainability Index, 2020).

As in other post-Soviet countries with electoral authoritarian regimes such as Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, presidential elections in Belarus have had the potential to become flashpoints for opposition activity and protests (Bunce 2017). Yet when this occurred in Belarus in 2006 and 2010 Lukashenka was able to see off this threat using a combination of pre-emptive authoritarianism such as changing legislation to make it harder to register or operate a political party or NGO before the election; and police brutality against protesters and the jailing of the leading opposition candidates after the election (Frear 2018). Following the 2006 election, new youth movements emerged in Belarus which were not affiliated with the 'traditional' opposition or with political parties and were prepared to use more direct and radical methods of opposing the regime. Yet for many years they were largely restricted to the 'virtual realm' of internet politics which failed to reach much of the population until fairly recently and they did not manage to sustain themselves organizationally in order to build a wider resistance movement (Korosteleva 2009).

From around 2015, the regime's approach to civil society underwent something of a shift in the context of the so-called political liberalisation on the one hand and ongoing socio-economic turbulence in Belarus (including a deterioration of the demographic situation). It began to see civil society as a resource which could be used to deliver certain cultural programmes and social services which the state could not (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021; Bindman and Chulitskaya forthcoming). It also began to view civil society as an instrument which could be used to demonstrate to the West that the political environment in Belarus allowed CSOs to exist. This led to a proliferation of civic initiatives in the areas of culture, urban development, gender issues and other spheres as a kind of 'controlled openness' which made some activism and civic participation possible as long as it was not overtly political (Bedford 2021). However, human rights defenders and other organisations whose activities were seen by the authorities as potentially dangerous for the status quo still faced substantial restrictions even in terms of legal registration. Many of them (including the world-renowned human rights organisation *Viasna*) could not get official legal status in Belarus and either acted as unregistered organisations or were legally registered abroad (Chulitskaya et al. 2020).

By early 2020 the Belarusian regime had no reason to expect problems would arise as a result of the upcoming presidential election in August of that year. Moshes and Nizhnikau (2021) argue that by this point political opposition had been marginalised, civil society had been largely co-opted and had its energy directed into non-political activities, and Belarusian society seemed politically apathetic and accepting of the fact that Lukashenka would remain in power for life. Civil society in Belarus before the developments in the spring and summer of 2020 existed predominantly in the form of organised (and constrained) civil society organisations and mass social movements were not yet present.

Civil society and the events of 2020

In March 2020 Lukashenka made the kind of unforced error that Treisman (2020) argues can lead to democratization by mistake – where an authoritarian leader has no intention of ceding power but fails to choose the course most likely to avoid this scenario. His refusal to recognise the rapidly emerging Covid crisis as a threat to public health or to implement even the most basic infection control measures appalled Belarusians, damaged trust in the state and created an opportunity for critics of the regime to mobilize supporters against it (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021). This led new grassroots civil society organisations such as *#ByCovid19* to form, crowd-fund resources and involve large numbers of previously non-political volunteers and activists in helping to support hospital staff who then went on to become involved in the political campaign leading up to the election in August and the subsequent protests. They were helped in this effort by members of Belarus’ extensive IT sector who played a central role in creating online platforms for crowdfunding, election monitoring and new civil society organisations (Kryvoi 2020). Existing social enterprise organisations such as *Imena* were also key to organising and promoting these endeavours.

When the protests began in Belarus, civil society structures and organizations that had emerged prior to 2020 (including long-standing Belarusian political parties) did not play a proactive role in these processes; that is, they were not their initiators. The drivers of political mobilisation were completely different forces and actors, while more established civil society organizations played more of a supporting role in ongoing processes and were involved in them, as a rule, at the level of activists’ individual participation rather than at the institutional level (BIPART 2020). Some human rights organisations (including *Viasna* and other initiatives) were more involved from the very beginning in performing their primary functions of human rights defence such as monitoring state violations of protesters’ and detainees’ rights. Another example of more active although not institutional involvement was the case of the young female activists from the organisation *Ee Prava* (Her Rights) who were among the initiators and active participants of the Women’s Marches which conducted every week from August until November 2020.

Meanwhile other diverse social movements which bring together large numbers of women, pensioners, students, factory workers and professionals and have nationwide reach have sprung up since the first wave of protests in August 2020 to maintain the momentum of the protest movement in the face of extensive repression of its participants by the authorities. Despite the widespread use of violence against protesters both during and after the initial mass protests, those who continue to engage in protest activity have at all times remained entirely peaceful, something which Bekus (2021) sees as a strategic choice which has enabled mobilization across a range of societal groups. While the authorities’ campaign of repression has at least temporarily been successful in putting a stop to the kinds of mass protests of hundreds of thousands of people which took place in Minsk and other towns and cities in the summer and early autumn of 2020, the protests have transformed themselves into less visible yet still powerful and subversive forms of local resistance and self-help which continue to undermine the legitimacy of the regime (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021).

The upsurge in mass mobilisation in the summer and autumn of 2020 triggered many positive changes in the level of trust, solidarity, and activism amongst Belarusian citizens. It inspired a rejection of the stereotypical perception of “politics” and “social activity” as “unworthy,” “dangerous” or as marginal spheres and activated an explosive process of forming a positive

image of “self” as a civic nation with the forming of many new civic initiatives and local communities. However, the swift and widespread use of repression by the authorities in response puts into question the endurance and long-term nature of these effects (BIPART 2021).

Belarusian civil society in a situation of political crisis: the state of the art

After the suppression of the initial mass protests in mid- to late 2020, the Belarusian authorities proceeded with the use of systematic and harsh repression against civil society. The rhetoric and actions of the Belarusian authorities were and remain aimed at destroying any independent activity in principle. Therefore, at present repression and restrictions are applied more and more not only to those who disagree with the status quo, but also with respect to any initiative that does not originate from and/or is not completely controlled by the state.

2021 became a tragic year for civil society in the country when all types of organisations and movements faced unprecedented repression on the institutional and individual level. If at the beginning of the crisis in late 2020 and early 2021 repressions were mostly against individual members of CSOs and activists, from mid-2021 the authorities started a witch-hunt aimed at organisations and initiatives. From July 2021 onwards there was a series of arrests of activists working for CSOs and searches of the offices of organizations and at the homes of activists. More than 200 CSOs (around 10 percent of all registered CSOs in the country) of different forms were liquidated or are in the process of liquidation (BIPART 2021). As of February 28, 2022, 366 non-profit organizations in Belarus were in the process of forced dissolution (including lawsuits and forced removal from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities and Individual Entrepreneurs). There were 223 non-profit organizations (public associations, foundations, and institutions) in relation to which statutory authorities or founders made the decision to liquidate them (Lawtrend 2022).

Many civic initiatives, especially those who were to any degree connected to the protest activities or opposition political leadership in exile (particularly the presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya) were officially proclaimed as extremist organisations by the Belarusian authorities. It should be mentioned that at the beginning the most serious attention and repression were directed against newly established initiatives like *BySol* - a crowdfunding initiative and later formal organisation which raises funds for those who have suffered from repression; *Rabochyi Ruh* (Workers Movement) which brought together Belarusian workers ready to participate in strike action; and more specialised initiatives such as the *Foundation of Medical Solidarity* which assist medical professionals who supported the protests. Thus, all types of Belarusian civil society organisations and initiatives faced repression. If at the beginning there had been some belief or hope that those organisations which existed before 2020, had initially separated themselves from politics and had relatively good relations with Belarusian civil servants and officials would avoid repressions, this rational presumption was not borne out and the majority of such organisations were repressed.

The pressure exerted on Belarusian civic initiatives and CSOs by the Lukashenka regime since 2021 has had three main directions and several important consequences. The first is physical threats against activists. Arrests, fines, administrative and criminal jail sentences, and the

forced departure from the country of leaders and/or members of organizations is greatly weakening the third sector. The greatest pressure has been exerted on human rights organisations (for instance, the entire leadership of *Viasna* has been imprisoned), but essentially any activity in any sphere – from social services to research and analysis – is under threat. In addition, on the legal level on January 22nd 2022 the Belarusian authorities reintroduced an article 193.1 "Activities on Behalf of Unregistered Organizations" of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus which brings back criminal responsibility for acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation. Belarusian CSOs, especially those which operate inside Belarus, are losing human resources as people choose safer activities such as moving to the IT sphere. Because of the unpredictability, the illogical nature of the repression, and the uncertainty of the rules of the game (the understanding of what can and cannot be done), people turn towards self-censorship and not only leave CSOs, but are also afraid of any form of civic activity. Some organizations have consciously decided to become non-public and “non-media” and consider the public activities of other CSOs that have members or staff in Belarus to be irresponsible (BIPART 2022).

The second dimension of the repression being used is the removal of technical and institutional opportunities which would enable the activities of organisations and civic initiatives to continue. Belarusian authorities conducted seizures of equipment, documents and bank accounts belonging to CSOs, initiated numerous inspections of their premises, and used their ability to liquidate legal entities and other types of institutional pressure on these organisations. In late 2021 some representatives of Belarusian CSOs expressed hope that after the constitutional referendum in late February 2022 which was initiated by the authorities, the institutional environment for their organisations might improve while the authorities themselves seemed to be promoting the idea that this might in fact happen (BIPART 2022). However, as subsequent events demonstrated, the referendum coincided with the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine which lead to further deterioration of the situation for any civic activity in Belarus.

The third dimension of the repression is the significant reduction in, or limitation of, funding opportunities for Belarusian CSOs and civic initiatives. Given current government rhetoric of a new Cold War with the West and the campaign against so-called “foreign agents”, any transparent funding from outside the country can become a pretext for persecution. The possibilities for legal financing of CSOs within the country have always been limited (CSO Sustainability Index 2020) but since late 2020 they have been practically non-existent. The risk of harassment of citizens and businesses providing financial support to CSOs (including donations and crowdfunding) increased because such support was linked to allegedly "financing the protests". Receiving money in Belarus from any foreign counterpart under any type of legal contract has become virtually impossible as it is highly likely to cause repressive actions by law enforcement agencies against the Belarusian CSOs receiving the funds and their individual employees - numerous inspections are taking place and criminal prosecutions are being initiated for receiving funds from abroad (BIPART 2022).

As a result of the direct threats and challenges of the post-2020 developments, many Belarusian organisations, initiatives and their activists physically chose to leave the country. Some of the CSOs already had legal entities abroad for financial and/or legal reasons (Chulitskaya et al. 2020) and they are currently able to continue their activities for Belarus from abroad. Another group of organisations and activists started the process of legal registration, formal and informal resettlement abroad. A third group of organisations still have activists and, in rare cases, legal entities in Belarus, and function in a mixed mode with some members (usually the leadership) of the organisation abroad and other members remaining inside the country. The most popular destinations for the institutional migration of Belarusian CSOs and initiatives have been Lithuania and Poland – neighbouring countries which have long been traditional hubs for Belarusian civil society. However, the post-2020 developments in Belarus saw Belarusian organisations and activists moving to the additional destinations of Ukraine and Georgia. Relocation to Ukraine has caused additional tragic developments and challenges for Belarusian activists since the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine in February 2022 as they have been forced to become refugees for the second time in a short space of time.

Based on these different modes of existence, Belarusian CSOs and initiatives face different challenges and have different needs. Although all Belarusian CSOs and initiatives intend to work with an explicitly Belarusian agenda, there is a growing gap between the organisations inside and outside Belarus due to the fact that relocated CSOs tend to become estranged from the actual Belarusian context and they exist and act in different jurisdictions and contexts. Organizations and initiatives are at different stages of implementing their activities: from continuing to work in Belarus in some form or having been recently dissolved to full institutionalization and operation abroad. Consequently, there are different agendas for their activities. In addition, the field of activity also affects the way a particular organization functions. For example, many of the organizations that provide services to vulnerable groups have chosen to stay in Belarus even with all the restrictions and risks that entails because it is impossible to support their target groups otherwise. Other organizations, such as those engaged in research, are less restricted by this factor and can work from abroad more easily. It is important to note that there is a risk that organizations in Belarus may drop out of sight of their target audiences who simply will not know or receive information about their existence and activities, especially given the accompanying crackdown on independent media and/or the replacement of civil society organizations by so-called "government-organized NGOs" (GONGOs).

Conclusion

It is clear that Belarusian civil society continues to operate in extremely unfavorable conditions. From the broad political repression of activists in July 2021 the Belarusian government shifted to more targeted institutional repression of CSOs of various kinds that operate in various spheres. The process of the mass dissolution of CSOs continues today. Many organizations and activists have been forced to leave the country and now conduct their activities from abroad because of the greatly increased threats to their personal safety. Despite the intensification of repression and worsening conditions, combined with the fact that many CSOs are truly on the

edge of survival, Belarusian CSOs continue to operate. They retain the potential to act as an agent of socio-political transformation, at least by preserving the space of free activity both inside and outside the country. Nevertheless, the current state of CSOs can be described as both "survival" and "crisis". CSOs are losing not only their registration status in Belarus, but also people (especially in Belarus) and their connections with target groups. In addition, it is suggested that the subjectivity of civil society is being undermined. There is a growing gap between "those who left" and "those who stayed" in terms of both people and organizations, and their respective needs and problems.

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