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Explaining the mass protests in Belarus in 2020: What role did civil society play?

Eleanor Bindman[a] and Tatsiana Chulitskaya[b]

[a]Department of History, Politics and Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; [b]Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the mass protests in Belarus following the presidential elections there in August 2020. We argue that CSOs which had existed under Lukashenka's authoritarian regime before 2020 and focused on a largely non-political agenda played a more limited role in these protests. We examine the grassroots CSOs which sprang up in the country in response to the COVID crisis in the spring of 2020 and in the run-up to the presidential elections that summer and gave those who joined them crucial experience of organizing and networking. We explore the role of informal community initiatives which formed once the protests had started and helped to sustain them afterwards. Using data from interviews with exiled Belarusians in three countries in 2023, we find that this wide variety of CSOs had an important but mixed impact in terms of mobilizing opposition to Lukashenka's regime during the main protest period, with many expressing explicit political goals and becoming indistinguishable from the wider protest movement, while others continued with "business as usual." After severe state repression began in late 2020, many organizations were forced into exile abroad where they have attempted to build capacity ever since.

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Introduction

This article explores the role played by civil society organizations (CSOs) in the mass protests which took place in Belarus following the presidential elections there in August 2020. These elections saw the incumbent president Aliaksandar Lukashenka claim victory based on extensive electoral fraud despite widespread public support for the rival opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. We argue that CSOs which had existed under Lukashenka's authoritarian regime for a number of years prior to 2020 and had focused on a diverse and mostly non-political agenda played

CONTACT Eleanor Bindman e.bindman@mmu.ac.uk

an important but limited role in these protests. This role mostly involved monitoring the extensive human rights violations that were perpetrated against many protesters; providing them with legal, medical and other forms of assistance; and sharing their experience with the new civil society and political actors that emerged. A number of opposition parties such as the Belarusian Popular Front, the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Green Party, the Belarusian left party "A Just World" (a former Communist Party) and others could be considered part of civil society in Belarus since some of them had never been allowed to register formally as parties and all of them had very limited opportunities to participate in elections. They were thus mostly involved in advocacy campaigns and projects similar to those implemented by Belarusian civil society. By 2020, however, they had been subjected to many years of direct and indirect repression, had weak links to the broader population and were largely marginalized as political actors.[1] We focus more closely on the new grassroots initiatives and organizations which sprang up in the country in response to the COVID crisis in the spring of 2020 and/or in the run-up to the presidential elections that summer; and on the informal community groups and initiatives which formed in various neighbourhoods once the protests had started. We seek to answer the following research questions:

- What impact did diverse civil society organizations and initiatives have on mobilizing and sustaining protest activity during the wave of mass protests in Belarus from August to October 2020?
- To what extent did civil society organizations and initiatives form part of a broader social movement which came together to oppose the regime and what can this tell us about such a movement's prospects for success?

While most people participated in the protests as individuals or in small groups of friends and family members, these formal and informal groups gave a far larger number of people than usual experience of volunteering, organizing and interacting with diverse groups of strangers as part of civil society while living under an authoritarian regime, something which is highlighted by our interviewees below. Over a very short period of time this kind of participation and activism became explicitly political as the protests took off and the authorities responded with violence. This kind of participation has been of particular importance in sustaining opposition to Lukashenka since 2020 even as several hundred thousand Belarusians were forced into exile by government repression and many civil society organizations have had to continue their activity from outside the country. This study uses data from extensive interviews conducted in 2023 with Belarusian civil society and political activists and members of the public who participated in the protests there and were then forced to go into exile abroad from 2020 onwards. The topic of mass protests and political mobilization in Belarus has been the focus of a number of studies since the events of 2020[2] with particular attention being given to the involvement of different social groups and their identities[3] and the role of previously existing social networks.[4] The role of Belarusian civil society in protest has received some attention so far,[5] with Petrova and Korosteleva[6] exploring the concepts of self-organization and community resilience specifically. However, the systematic review and analysis of both more established and newer civil society organizations' role in the protests and their ability to mobilize and sustain protest activity has not yet been examined in sufficient detail. This article intends to

overcome this gap and provide insights into the role played by diverse civil society initiatives in the 2020 protest wave and its immediate aftermath.

Civil society is, as Edwards[7] points out, an "elastic concept" which encompasses a wide variety of different types of organizations which vary in size and formality including community or grassroots organizations, social movements, trade unions, NGOs, professional associations and many others; and which focuses on how these organizations interact with each other and with the state and the market.[8] We begin by exploring the theoretical and empirical context to how civil society operates within the constraints of an authoritarian regime before examining the relationship between civil society, social movements and protest mobilization in nondemocratic settings. We then provide a brief overview of the environment that existed for civil society in Belarus before 2020 before using our research findings to analyse how this environment changed in 2020. We explore the relationship between the new civil society groups that emerged, the more established CSOs that had been active but constrained or co-opted prior to 2020, and the mass protests in the country that took place between August and the autumn of that year.

Civil society under authoritarianism

It is important first to explore how civil society operates under authoritarianism of the kind that exists in Belarus and how CSOs are forced to adapt their activities and often their very existence in response to the approach taken by authoritarian regimes to non-state groups perceived to have critical or oppositional capacity. In democratic contexts liberal political theory sees civil society as involving 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 on seeking concessions or redress from the state than trying to win formal power.[9] A robust and independent civil society is often seen as a key element in mobilizing citizens at all stages of the process of successful democratization ,[10] although this is just one among many factors involved in the democratization process.[11] Theories of civil society in democratic settings have often stressed the importance of civility, autonomy and the role of a structured third sector which exists between the state and the market and focuses on promoting collective and consensual responses to pressing public issues and agendas which are recognized by most as central.[12]

In authoritarian regimes civil society often performs very different functions and civil society organizations must contend with different constraints to those which apply in democratic contexts. Authoritarian consolidation tends to be based on three primary strategies: repression (the use of coercion and threats); co-optation (providing benefits to specific groups to convince them not to question the system); and legitimation (getting people to justify, accept, or at least tolerate the current regime).[13] Authoritarian rulers tend to perceive the activity of CSOs as a threat due to the resources they possess that could be mobilized by disaffected elites to challenge their rulers: these include the ability to mobilize people in pursuit of community objectives; and having capable and dedicated professional organizers. This makes harassment and/or repression of such organizations a logical choice for authoritarian rulers, yet at the same time CS0s often provide public goods such as social services which the state is either unable or unwilling to provide.[14] Plantan[15] describes the

strategy taken towards CSOs by the authoritarian leaders of countries such as Russia and China as a mix of direct or indirect repression; co-optation or channelling; encouragement; and neglect. Leaders of these countries have often tolerated the existence of CSOs and actively employed the co-optation and/or channelling strategy in order to maximize the benefits these organizations can provide while limiting the political risks to the regime. As Huang[16] points out, "one common strategy for autocrats is to create but manipulate institutional space for CSOs, confining them to service delivery while insulating them from social movements." Grassroots CSOs and activists can continue to operate in this context and can even play an active role in certain clearly delimited spheres such as social welfare or environmental issues but only if they limit any attempt at democratic claim-making and assist in promoting the goals of the state.[17]

Lukashenka's regime has consistently and extensively wielded the repression mechanism against civil society initiatives and protest activity in Belarus since the early 1990s. Between 2015 and 2020, however, there were increasing attempts to use the co-optation and even encouragement mechanisms to involve CSOs in social service delivery and cultural projects in similar ways to the strategies used in Russia and China, albeit in a more limited way. As we explore below, this shift in strategy actually helped to lay some of the groundwork for the explosion in civic and protest activity in 2020, even though this was far from the regime's intention. As Astapova et al point out,[18] in Belarus in 2020 " … co-optation carried the seeds of its termination: civil society remained vibrant in the co-optation mode, and the capacity built over that period was promptly redeployed for political purposes when circumstances allowed." Indeed, while the prospects for civil society activity independent of authoritarian state monitoring and/or control may seem somewhat bleak within this type of regime, the examples of Belarus and other authoritarian countries indicate that this is far from the case. Mirshak,[19] for example, argues that Egypt's current authoritarian regime under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has brutal repressive capabilities but remains contestable by hidden but still active CSOs and movements advocating democratic and social change which have developed since the 2011 uprising; and other types of organizations such as neighbourhood associations, labour organizations and feminist and anarchist collectives which largely remain outside state surveillance and control.

Civil society and protest mobilization

Having touched on some of the challenges and possible opportunities for CSOs contending with authoritarian regimes, it is important to explore the relationship between civil society activity and mass protest when this occurs within this same regime type. While many civil society organizations tend to operate in the "third sector" as structured NGOs or operate as less formal but still organized grassroots groups and associations, social movements are seen as informal networks which transcend the boundaries of any specific organization 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,[20] and are seen as a variant of what Tilly and Tarrow call "contentious politics."[21] Several scholars have highlighted the fact that social movements are a normal feature of life in contemporary authoritarian regimes as well as in democracies and that they have the potential under certain circumstances to challenge illiberal systems of

governance, extract policy concessions and contribute to democratization.[22] In terms of how civil society organizations and social movements are analysed, Della Porta[23] points out that the distinction between the two phenomena has become increasingly blurred: civil society organizations frequently participate in protest campaigns and membership of the two types of organizations often overlaps. Civil society organizations can become politicized and sometimes morph into social movement organizations. Furthermore, social movements have triggered the development of civil society organizations as a means of survival in the lull after intense moments of protest have died down, something which can be seen clearly in the Belarusian case. As a result, it is important to analyse these two broad types of organizations together in order to understand their contribution to protest dynamics. In the context of post-communist Europe to which Belarus belongs, Baca and Jacobssson and Saxonberg[24] point out that the traditional scholarly focus on low levels of participation, the weakness of civil society in the region and emphasizing the role of formal NGOs risks reducing the concept of civil society to a narrow "third sector." It also means that the types of mobilization and collective action that do take place in less structured formats are missed: these include

> … loose activist networks, local grassroots activism or short-lived mobilizations … in expecting social movements in post-communist Europe to follow the same pattern and operate in the same fashion as in Western Europe, previous research has not always tapped all relevant forms of contentious action.[25]

This seems particularly relevant in the case of Belarus where, as Astapova et al.[26] argue, the political upheaval in 2020 had all the key features of a social movement as defined by Tilly[27]: it was a sustained and coordinated public effort opposing the regime; it combined multiple forms of political activity including protest rallies, signature collection, fundraising and media campaigns; and its participants demonstrated worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. We therefore explore the interplay between the more established civil society organizations and the looser and more grassroots organizations and forms of civic activism which developed during 2020 and the extent to which they constituted part of a broader social movement which sought to change the political system in Belarus.

In terms of the direct role played by various types of civil society organization in mobilizing protesters to come out onto the streets in opposition to an authoritarian regime, scholars differ in their view of how crucial this role is. Carothers and Press[28] argue that malign behaviour around elections such as electoral fraud or delayed vote counts is by far the biggest trigger for protests in authoritarian states, while Hess[29] notes that post-communist regions have long seen rigged elections emerge as a focal point for popular contention against the regime. In this sense Belarus is a perfect case study of this as the protests in 2020 were triggered by Lukashenka's attempt to rig the presidential election in August of that year. In recent years the role of civil society and social movement organizations in such protests has varied. In Hong Kong, for example, the longstanding social movement coalition the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), which consisted of political parties and CSOs, organized mass lawful and peaceful protests against the extradition law which the Hong Kong government tried to force through in 2019 and which acted as the catalyst for huge and sustained mass mobilization there.[30] While these played a pivotal role in maintaining the protest movement's momentum and putting pressure on the

government, the CHRF's role was largely overtaken by a highly decentralized and leaderless anti-authoritarian protest movement which relied much more on anonymity, social media and creative tactics to mobilize large numbers of mainly young people against the extradition law. As a result, "for both members of the CHRF and protesters, they see CHRF as a platform rather than the commander of the movement."[31]

In relation to post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe, Way[32] argues that in the context of Ukraine since 1990 large and even successful protests can emerge spontaneously or be prompted by organizations which operate outside of civil society and that Ukrainian civil society has been better at channelling popular protest once it has already started than in bringing people out onto the streets when protests begin. In this sense civil society can play the role of a "traffic cop" in terms of directing and facilitating protest activity: "When civil society is effective as a traffic cop, it becomes more likely that protests will have the resources to last and to influence political outcomes. Yet traffic cops cannot bring cars onto the streets."[33] Although Ukraine during the Maidan revolution in 2014 arguably had a much less constrained environment for civil society than Belarus in 2020, there are parallels with the role that both more established and newly emerged civil society organizations and initiatives played in the Belarusian protest movement. Most people attended the protests as individuals or in small groups of friends and family members, with approximately 28% of protesters belonging to a social movement or civil society organization such as a trade union, church, sporting association, cultural, humanitarian, women's, LGBT, environment, self-help, community, volunteer, or human/civil rights organization.[34] We argue that civil society organizations did not lead the protests but played a key role in laying the groundwork for them before 2020 and in March to July 2020, in particular, and thereafter in helping to sustain opposition to Lukashenka as the mass social movement which opposed his regime went into abeyance in the face of widespread repression.

Data and methods

This study is based on 58 semi-structured interviews with three groups of interviewees: representatives of CSOs and social movements, including a member of an independent trade union (30); Belarusian political activists and members of the opposition (7); and representatives of the Belarusian public who participated in the protests in 2020 but had little to no prior experience of being involved in any kind of activism (21). The majority of our interviewees came from Minsk, but several came from regional centres such as Hrodno, Homel, and smaller cities like Barysaw and Babruysk plus some small villages (not named here for the sake of security), ensuring that we could get a sense of how the protests had played out in different locations across the country. Interviews were conducted in Russian or Belarusian according to the interviewee's preference. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic and the need to ensure the security of our interviewees, we talked only to those Belarusians who are living in exile. For the same reasons we were unable to conduct interviews inside Belarus or to speak to representatives of state-affiliated organizations and this naturally limits our ability to give a more general analysis of the contribution of civil society overall. However, the data we have gathered in relation to both the pre-existing more autonomous civil society organizations in Belarus and the new groups that emerged during 2020 allows us to draw conclusions about their contribution to protest activity there.

We used a snowball sampling approach to identify our interviewees and primarily relied on personal contacts to do so. We mitigated the limitations of this by using secondary data analysis. In our semi-structured interviews, we focused on interviewees' experiences of protest activity in 2020 and the role played by Belarusian civil society in all its diverse forms during the protests. The interviews were conducted in the period January – July 2023 in three locations: Vilnius, Lithuania; Tbilisi, Georgia; and Warsaw, Poland. Two interviews were conducted online. These three countries were chosen because they (together with Ukraine prior to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022) became the main destination for Belarusians who had supported the protests and then had to leave the country after large-scale repression began in late 2020. Full ethical approval for the project was obtained from Manchester Metropolitan University's Ethics Committee before the fieldwork commenced. The identities of all interviewees have been anonymized and all data collected has been stored securely. Following transcription the interviews were coded manually using the following themes: civil society pre-/during/post-2020; social movements; protest mobilization; and personal experience and perception of the protests. In addition to the interviews, we make extensive use of secondary data analysis in this study including Belarusian independent and international media materials and reports by international and national organizations related to the protest events of 2020 and civil society in Belarus.

Civil society in Belarus before 2020

Prior to the events of 2020, civil society organizations in Belarus were primarily seen as weak and marginal in terms of their social base,[35] even though the immediate post-1991 era had seen the emergence of mass movements and protests, national and cultural organizations; and independent trade unions.[36] After coming to power in 1994, Lukashenka made relentless efforts to eliminate sources of opposition to his regime and use the instruments of state repression and co-optation against his political opponents, independent media and civil society.[37] At the same time, his regime offered a "social contract" to the population that included extensive state subsidies and social support to most Belarusians.[38] Although there were some spikes in mass protest mobilization in 2006 and 2010 after fraudulent presidential elections and again in 2017 against the "social parasite" law,[39] political participation was generally limited.

The period following a presidential election usually saw an upsurge in the direct repression of civil society organizations and activists but otherwise the authorities tended to prefer more sophisticated legal, financial, and other tools.[40] From a regime legitimization perspective, the existence of a functioning civil society sector created a better image for the Belarusian government and increased opportunities for receiving international technical support. At the same time, many CSOs performed functions including social service provision (e.g. for vulnerable groups) that the state either did not want or did not have sufficient resources and skills to deliver.[41] The social contract between organized Belarusian civil society and the state required CSOs to avoid any kind of political agenda. Co-opted CSOs accepted and in some cases even deliberately emphasized their "non-political" status in order to exist and implement their activities within a hostile authoritarian environment.[42] These organizations, however, had very few opportunities to communicate their agenda to the public beyond their specific target groups. Organizations which chose to persist with an overtly "political" agenda were interrogated, their activists and leaders were detained or prosecuted, and they faced a range

of security threats. Some (for example the well-known human rights centre *Viasna*[43]) were restricted even from obtaining legal status in Belarus.

Where trade unions were concerned, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Belarus inherited a system of trade unions which covered all state-run enterprises. In parallel, democratic, independent trade unions emerged and started to defend workers' rights by organizing strikes and other actions. However, with the consolidation of the authoritarian regime in the country, they also became a target for harsh repression including physical suppression by the security services, arrests of their leaders and suspension of their activities by presidential decree in the 1990s and co-optation.[44] Until 2020, there were two parallel trade union groups in Belarus: the mass-membership state trade unions and their main organization, the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus; and the democratic trade unions (many of which were part of the umbrella organization the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP)) which were independent from the state, existed on a semi-legal basis with a limited number of members, and were constrained in their financial and organizational ability to represent Belarusian workers. During the protests of 2020, the democratic unions intensified their activities and attracted new members but did not become drivers of the workers' movement. Instead, new initiatives such as *Rabochiy Rukh* (Workers' Movement) appeared and mobilized workers to join the protests. This mobilization pattern was particularly vivid during the call for a national strike under the slogan "The National Ultimatum," which Tsikhanouskaya made at the end of October 2020. The strike was not a major success, as only some workers participated, although this included those from major industrial enterprises, and it faded within several weeks. Nevertheless, it marked an important development in the dynamics of Belarusian protest.[45] When the wave of repression started, both the new activists and members of the older democratic trade unions were persecuted, arrested or forced into exile.

The regime's period of so-called liberalization and openness towards the West from 2014 to 2020 brought various changes in the approach taken towards civil society. In the context of a deteriorating economic situation in Belarus, the authorities began to use civil society more widely as a tool to deliver specific cultural programmes and social services.[46] Seizing this window of opportunity, new organizations and initiatives in politically "neutral" spheres such as urban and local development, national language and culture, social support, gender and education began to appear.[47] Despite being non-political, they nevertheless demonstrated strong potential for engaging and networking with new members, thus creating grounds for increased trust and solidarity in Belarusian society. Another essential shift related to civil society was funding. For the first time, additional sources of funding such as national crowd-funding platforms (e.g. *Ulej, Talaka, MolaMola*[48]), and other philanthropic activities (in particular, those headed by future presidential candidate Viktar Babaryka's *Gazprombank*) appeared and to some extent reduced the dependence of civil society on foreign funding and provided them with broader room to manoeuvre.[49] The importance of these new platforms was underlined by one of our interviewees:

> *Babaryka* [one of the three opposition candidates for the presidency in 2020] *was one of those people who came up with ideas about civic cooperation and his son was one of the catalysts for this new trend for enabling the microfinancing of civic campaigns. His Mola-Mola platform, which was created to collect donations, had a lot of influence. Mola-Mola, Uley and Talaka before them enabled the creation of a system of charitable giving which was about participation*

and cooperation. People began to see that this was cool, it was possible, it worked and it wasn't some kind of abstract Red Cross – it had a concrete endpoint. (X-1)

Discussion: civil society during the protest period of 2020

Despite these openings for some parts of civil society from 2014 onwards, by early 2020 the regime had no reason on the surface to expect any major problems would arise as a result of the upcoming presidential election in August of that year. Moshes and Nizhnikau argue that by this point political opposition had been marginalized, civil society had been largely co-opted and/or 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.[50] At this point 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 recognize the rapidly emerging COVID pandemic in March to May 2020 as a threat to public health or to implement even the most basic infection control measures appalled Belarusians and severely damaged trust in the state.[51] This led new grassroots civil society initiatives such as *ByCovid19* to develop crowdfunding resources and involve large numbers of previously non-political volunteers in providing hospital staff with medical supplies, masks and provisions. *ByCovid19* and other COVID-related volunteer initiatives were helped in this effort by members of Belarus' extensive IT sector who played a central role in creating online platforms for crowdfunding and for monitoring the upcoming presidential election in August of that year.[52] Existing civil society organizations such as *Imena*[53] were also crucial in organizing and promoting these endeavours. A number of our interviewees pointed to the pandemic as a catalyst in terms of bringing people from diverse backgrounds and with little to no prior experience of volunteering into an environment of civic participation which paved the way for more political activism as the presidential election campaign took off in the spring and early summer of 2020:

> These new initiatives appeared against the backdrop of COVID, so not just in the context of the protest movement. And COVID really helped to enable all this. These two situations collided. This enabled new initiatives to appear which businesspeople got involved in as well. I think that if this hadn't happened, it's entirely possible that there would have been far fewer new initiatives linked to the protests than if there had been no COVID. (I-2)

> There was this huge outpouring of public support for medical personnel during the Covid times and just regular people making masks and bringing them to hospitals and then providing hot meals for medical staff and this sort of thing and spreading information. This was probably the peak in many ways of this organized activity. (X-2)

> During the COVID period we worked together with the country-wide campaign ByCOVID-19. We were in contact with volunteers at the centre in Minsk and gathered information from our doctors in terms of who needed what – the volunteers then collected it and handed it out. There was a really big burst of activism during this COVID campaign including from people who you might not expect – businessmen, doctors etc. After 2020 I had a lot of new contacts including doctors and all these other active people. There were lots of new people who until then had not been involved in any kind of activism. (B-3)

There was therefore considerable overlap in terms of membership and activity between both new and more established groups and initiatives focused on mitigating the effects

of the pandemic and those focused on monitoring the upcoming elections and supporting the political campaigns of Lukashenka's three primary opposition challengers – Viktar Babaryka, Valeriy Tsepkala and Siarhei Tsikhanouskiy. The newer civil society actors differed substantially from the more established organizations as they had the following characteristics which made them more akin to social movement organizations (SMOs) and blurred the lines between SMOs and more "traditional" civil society actors such as NGOs: (1) Mass participation with many people spontaneously joining. (2) The absence of a hierarchical organizational structure and reliance on coordination through networking (3) The participation of people with no prior experience of civic activism but with extensive professional experience.[54] These highly skilled specialists provided the foundation for the rapid success and results of the various activities that took place both in terms of mobilizing against Covid and mobilizing in favour of the three opposition candidates. The new civic initiatives that appeared in 2020 thus broadened the social base of civil society and increased the number of people involved in civic activism. These newly mobilized activists and initiatives had not experienced repression in the same way that some of the more established civil society organizations had prior to 2020 and therefore acted less cautiously from the point of view of security, allowing them to be more inclusive in terms of participation. The fact that new grassroots initiatives were formed largely spontaneously in an environment of "seizing the moment" where people approached each other with their ideas and proposals for shared activities was reiterated by our interviewees:

> The whole first wave [of mobilisation] was just groups of people who came together and called themselves something, they didn't have any official status. There is a major difference between a small group of like-minded people who are doing something and those who work for an official organisation. With official status … you have to think all the time about office space, bookkeeping and so on. Whereas a small association doesn't need to think about this. (Q-1)

> These organisations [which appeared in 2020] made it very easy to achieve some simple goals and to see the results, to accomplish something. (T-2)

> These organisations appeared in response to what mattered at the time. For example, "Honest People"[55] emerged as an organisation. Until then there was no organisation explaining the electoral process in a systematic way – how we go to vote, what voting rights we have – it just wasn't there. Honest People did this from the beginning – they explained in detail how the elections would take place, how to protect your vote, how to make a complaint about a polling station and so on. So they were responding to demand. In the same way that there were no foundations or organisations dealing with COVID but COVID came along and suddenly they appeared. (M-2)

Although many of these initiatives had started to grow during the initial pandemic period and in the simultaneous run-up to the presidential election, the blatant fraud committed during the election itself on 9th August and the subsequent and shocking violence and mass arrests the authorities used against those protesting peacefully against Lukashenka's stolen victory[56] in effect turbo-charged the desire of many to become involved in civic activity and organizing. This included a much broader cross-section of society including professional organizations representing medics, students, sportspeople and independent trade unions who had largely been unaware of the work done by longstanding autonomous civil society organizations such as the human rights NGO *Viasna* until that point:

> The idea was that there had to be some kind of response because the number of political prisoners started to grow massively and something needed to be done. At that time there were still

> public protests going on and they needed to be visible and this shouldn't just be a problem for human rights activists or those who had been working on this stuff for 20 years to handle. It was a much less predictable time then. Viasna was doing its great and unique work but not everyone understands it – just a narrow group of people. We wanted this to be understood by a much wider circle including those who were protesting. (L-1)

> The new organisations which emerged appeared as a reaction to something. When I was at Akrestina [the prison to which many arrested protesters were taken] a girl came up to me and handed me a phone – someone at the other end was saying we have a team of people here who want to help. And I wasn't even a leader of anything, it was just that so many didn't know who to turn to, how to get organised. After this a tent appeared at Akrestina where they were providing consultations [to protesters who had been released]. So, all of this appeared and then it grew into various initiatives. (H-1)

> Businesspeople and ordinary workers got involved, lots of new initiatives appeared, these were made up of people from different spheres – the creative class got very involved. I can't say who was more important but the entrepreneurs would describe this as their communities rising up, the medics would very much emphasise the role of their community and it all worked out because everyone got involved to different degrees based on what they could do. I understood that I could be described as a hipster and then there were these workers who were turning out and we all had the same problem and the same dissatisfaction. (A-1)

This point about the protests bringing together a broad coalition of different societal groups to organize and protest against the regime was supported by another of our interviewees who had been a factory worker and trade union organizer in Belarus before being forced into exile. According to him, like-minded employees at his factory had initially tried to engage with the existing independent trade union there but became frustrated with its stance as events began to move faster:

> In the summer of 2020, we got to know the independent trade union at the factory and understood that they were the only option in terms of organising workers within a union. Thank God that they existed and that they had some kind of experience. But at that point the union's position was along the lines of "listen, we already have this very repressive trade union law that we're really constrained by, this is not a labour dispute, it's not about raising salaries" – they took a very cautious position. We couldn't force the union to be different even though we were members of it so a different, separate organisation – a strike committee – was needed. So, we started to ask people and convince them to nominate delegates from their own union branches to make up this strike committee. The process began but it was slow at first.

The threat of repression was particularly intense for factory workers given that the regime had long considered them to be an important part of Lukashenka's electoral base. Despite this, many took part in the protests against the regime after the election:

> Together with other workers we took part in the protests in the town and saw all the violence that took place and for a few days after 9th August some felt a sense of despair that we couldn't do anything because we'd just be beaten in response. At that point we understood that if we had 22 people in a trade union organisation then that could quickly become 500 somewhere else where there was no trade union organising and that was happening in many places. We got to know activists from other enterprises and began to talk to them. These calls and meetings had 20–30 people in them each time, leaders and activists from different major enterprises across Belarus.

To some extent, this mirrors what was happening with other forms of organizing and activism where more established CSOs were overtaken by looser and more grassroots initiatives. Where the more autonomous of these CSOs were concerned, they chose various different paths during the mass protests. Some made public statements in support of them and *Viasna*, together with other human rights defenders, played a

vital role in monitoring the arrests and mistreatment of protesters by the authorities. Indeed, some of our interviewees pointed out that human rights activists and their longstanding experience of dealing with the authorities on behalf of political prisoners were suddenly in great demand:

> Human rights activists from the older organisations ended up being in a lot of demand because their services were right there on the ground. The constant violations of human rights, the arrests and so on – all this needed to be monitored and court cases were going ahead. Viasna put out a call for volunteers and within an hour they had thousands of applications – they weren't prepared for this because they never imagined they would get such a response. The older organisations may not be so important right now in the moment but for all these years they were preparing people, showing them, bringing them into civic activity, showing what was possible, what can be done, what is important and so on. (N-2)

> Take Viasna, which was carrying out monitoring at the mass protests, supporting people, monitoring what was happening with political prisoners etc. This did not just appear out of nowhere – there was an organisation which, based on years of experience, understood clearly what was happening, what they were doing, you could turn to them and get some clarification of what was going on. They brought structure to all this chaos because at one point people simply could not find their relatives. And if you hadn't already dealt with this every year then you didn't know who to call or what to do or where to look for them – you didn't know what was possible and what wasn't. So legal assistance from various organisations or initiatives really helped, even if they weren't waving flags, it was still a big contribution. (M-1)

Other organizations, however, chose a more passive position despite their years of experience of operating in constrained circumstances. Most of these organizations did not participate formally in the protests as organizations, although many of their staff did as individuals. Despite the febrile revolutionary atmosphere, some organizations continued to focus on "business as usual" in terms of implementing their narrowly defined projects and providing services. As a result, some of our interviewees who had experience of working with such organizations were rather critical of their approach to the momentous events sweeping the country in the summer and autumn of 2020 and how this contrasted with the actions of the newer groups and initiatives:

> They [the more established organisations] did not pursue a goal of trying to organise civil society, they did not try to help emerging initiatives. Everything was boiling over and we just stayed in our organisations and continued doing our own projects. Out there the world has already changed and here we are just observing it. It seems to me that the new organisations felt a sense of responsibility that if I am capable then I can organise a chat group or an underground movement or explain to people how to leave the country or sew flags – this was all done by the new organisations. I didn't come across a single one of the older civil society organisations who participated in the peaceful protests in 2020 as an organisation. This includes me – I was the head of an organisation and I went to the women's marches by myself. I didn't see a single one of the older organisations at the women's movements – there were marches, the doctors and the sportsmen and so on – these were all new organisations. I think the older organisations were lost and eroded. (L-1)

> The older organisations from more organised civil society ended up being quite out of their depth. We had a meeting in August after the election and people said openly that we were not doing anything as organisations, we were simply volunteering and doing things individually. This is because established civil society consisted of fairly narrow groups and we had no role in the mass protests. And at the same time a lot of new organisations emerged: foundations which collected money themselves, courtyard community initiatives, associations which were similar to trade unions for example the doctors' association and the sportsmen's association

> which did not support the fraudulent elections, various local initiatives, students and so on. (N-2)

The relationship between the older and newer groups and organizations could at times be chaotic, fraught and beset by misunderstandings or misperceptions of who had done what in relation to supporting the protests and those persecuted by the authorities for taking part. Many of our interviewees, however, emphasized the importance of the role played by both sets of organizations in preparing the ground for this outburst of civic activity in 2020 and in sustaining it once it had begun. They also emphasized the need for greater cooperation post-2020 between the older and newer generations of civil society:

> The new organisations started to say "well until we came along no one did anything" – I always had the sense that there was no transfer of institutional memory. People and initiatives appeared and it seemed to them that everything was just starting from then. But there was a whole backstory – that's what ties the older and newer organisations together. On the other hand, the new organisations were fresh blood – they involved those who had never even thought about some kind of initiative. I think it's a great experience when lots of people come from somewhere outside of our NGO ghetto. Not like when a new organisation appears and you see that it's just the same people as before – in this case lots of genuinely new people came forward. It had the advantage of attracting a wide range of people. It was bad that there were no links between the older and newer organisations. These links are still only just being established. (K-1)

> Those organisations which emerged in 2020 played a huge role – the biggest, I think. Those which existed before 2020 had a role which I couldn't say was either active or passive but it was cumulative during the whole period because for example the role of observing elections and peaceful protests was done by both human rights activists and people who just signed up at the time to monitor elections. It was a huge role, without this nothing would have happened that's for sure. But, of course, the scale and novelty of the initiatives which appeared in 2020 and the fact that from the beginning they had no ideological orientation – for example Holos or Honest People – these were completely new organisations with a very clear message so they could attract people who, if the situation had been different, other organisations could not have attracted. Obviously, they had ideological differences between each other and so on. But this was more symbolic. (D-1)

Another respondent highlighted a key difference between the newer initiatives that emerged in relation to the build-up to the elections and the subsequent crackdown on protest that followed them, and those organizations who had adapted to the regime's position prior to 2020 by avoiding any talk of politics: while these newer groups tended not to espouse a particular political ideology beyond calling for free and fair elections, they nevertheless developed a clear political orientation:

> Those organisations which appeared in 2020 had a clear political element where there was a political goal – to remove or change the political system. (I-1)

This may be another reason why some of the newer initiatives from 2020 were able to establish themselves as formal CSOs in the "abeyance" period[57] in exile since the mass protests were eventually extinguished by repression in the autumn of 2020 and CSOs became a main target for the authorities in 2021. *Honest People*, for example, has become a CSO in exile with an established team of staff and an active social media presence. Other organizations have also established themselves in either Vilnius or Warsaw and coordinate with each other and sometimes with the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (the internationally recognized leader of the Belarusian opposition in

exile) and/or other opposition organizations. According to another respondent, the ties that were established between individual volunteers and organizations during the protests endured after they were crushed, whether those involved stayed in the country or not:

> Lots of organisations became very involved in helping out later on. All these psychologists and so on who had very little prior connection to support services. Lots of them were affiliated with civic organisations. Membership organisations continued to operate and this meant it all involved working with people. The fact that they continued to work after 2020 says to me that they worked really well. People trusted them and stayed with them. (G-1)

This holds true for the less formal and more localized groups and initiatives as well: one protest participant who had gone into exile in Warsaw spoke of her experience of maintaining contact with the entirely new group of people she got to know during the main protest period in 2020:

> Thanks to these courtyard chat groups we all got to know each other and became friends – this was within a month in a building where until then I knew no one. I still keep in touch with my neighbours from there, they all moved on somewhere, some to Warsaw, and we really do stay in touch. (M-1)

Many of our respondents pointed out how remarkably widespread civic participation became across Belarusian society in 2020 and how this had led in effect to a "rebirth" of civil society in the country:

> The events of 2020 and the way in which society came together on a horizontal level and the mutual aid which existed then – it allows us to say not just that civil society was reborn but that civil society expanded from involving an elite and relatively small class of people, the intelligentsia, to every level from the village to the small towns when people who did not have strong political opinions, who had never expressed their opinion in 20 years, who lived in their village and never thought about any of this, suddenly decided to make a stand against violence. (W-2)

> The events of 2020 reformed civil society, hardened it and gave it a huge base. There were these initiatives where people showed up and came together for the first time. There would be discussions and chats and so on. It was a springboard for them because in 2020 the opportunities for civil society met the demands coming from the society for which they worked. With this synergy civil society took off in a much bigger way than when everyone acts on their own. (B-1)

It has to be pointed out that despite the impressive degree of civil society and social movement mobilization that took place in Belarus in 2020, ultimately the aims of the movement were not achieved. The results of the election were upheld and the regime's crackdown appeared to work in terms of crushing the mass protest movement and forcing organizations and individuals underground or into exile. Indeed, Lukashenka appears more entrenched in power than ever with presidential elections scheduled for January 2025 which have been denounced by the opposition in exile as a sham.[58] Yet while the movement may be in its "abeyance" phase at present, many organizations have spent the past 3 years attempting to maintain momentum by building capacity in exile. They have done this by utilizing social media to continue reaching a domestic audience in Belarus and lobbying foreign governments on behalf of the more than 1400 political prisoners in the country, albeit with varying degrees of success.[59] In this sense, these organizations are laying the groundwork for any future window of opportunity that may emerge in relation to political mobilization in Belarus which, as in 2020, could come quickly and unexpectedly.

Co-opted and pro-government civil society actors

While this article has focused on the more autonomous elements of Belarusian civil society in 2020, it is important to briefly explore the role of those CSOs which had been successfully co-opted by the authorities or established directly by them as government-organized NGOs (GONGOs).

Co-opted CSOs were, at least on the institutional level, predictably cautious in their attitudes towards the wave of protests. Being aware of the likelihood of forthcoming repression, many opted not to express any anti-government agenda publicly. Many intended to keep to "business as usual" and to follow previously established rules of the game in the hope that this approach would save their organizations from repression (although, as subsequent developments demonstrated, this strategy worked for just a few organizations). These co-opted CSOs, particularly in the social sphere, explained their position as a need to take care of their target groups who otherwise would not have any support at all and to preserve their organizations. At the same time, on the individual level many of those who belonged to the co-opted part of civil society joined the protests too.

> There were many established NGOs who continued to work, at least until the spring of 2021, they were just trying to at least preserve their position, as I understand it, maybe from a distance, because then it was unclear how it would end. Maybe it would end in a purge and if so they had to at least preserve their own organisations. (H-1)

Some organizations which until 2020 were not entirely co-opted but were also not completely autonomous actually joined the government's propaganda efforts during and after the protests. One such example is the think-tank *Minsk Dialogue*, which prior to the protests kept a relatively balanced position of cooperation with Western and Belarusian governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.[60] After 2020, this organization took a pro-government path of formulating and promoting pro-Lukashenka narratives and cooperating with Russia.[61]

GONGOs unsurprisingly became even more instrumentalized by the state which mobilized members of these organizations to restore their legitimacy and demonstrate popular support for the regime. Thus, on August 16, 2023, one of the GONGOs – White Rus' (*Belaya Rus'*) – organized a rally in Minsk in support of Lukashenka for which they brought people from different Belarusian regions.[62] In September 2020, there was an attempt to replicate the success of the women's movement and Saturday rallies when the *Women's Union* GONGO gathered for a major event in Minsk.[63] Evaluation of this kind of anti-democratic mobilization is challenging. It consolidated core supporters of Lukashenka, but it is unlikely that it attracted any new members. In parallel, the mass pro-democratic protest mobilization taking place at the time affected some members of GONGOs, particularly those whose membership was formal rather than ideological. Although there is no reliable quantitative data regarding protest mobilization among members of these organizations, independent media report cases when people who even held managerial positions in GONGOs were prosecuted because of their participation or support of the protests.[64] Additionally, at least one of our interviewees held a managerial position in an official trade union before she joined the protests.

Conclusions

During the early stages of the pandemic and the overlapping run-up to the presidential elections in Belarus in 2020, a large number of civil society initiatives were

spontaneously formed which were simultaneously part of, but also drivers of, the protest wave. They provided space but also guidelines for people to express pro-democracy aspirations and their opposition to the country's authoritarian leader, and they clearly stated their political goals which were to change the authoritarian leadership and conduct new, free and fair elections. Activists from these initiatives and organizations could not be separated from the protest movement and ultimately became closer in many respects to political opposition actors than civic activists in their actions and intentions. At the same time, more established autonomous civil society actors played a supportive rather than an active role in the protest movement. Moreover, their relationship to, and participation in, the protests differed depending on the level of their co-optation by the authoritarian state. While the more autonomous part of established civil society was more active in relation to protest activities such as monitoring arrests and human rights abuses, the more co-opted part demonstrated a more cautious mode of action and, in some cases, continued their "business as usual."

When it comes to relations between the older and newer civil society initiatives and organizations during the protests of 2020, they were largely chaotic and non-systematic. If, at the beginning of the protest period, the two parts of the civil society for the most part lived a parallel life with few overlaps and a lack of trust towards each other, as the protest movement developed and the repression intensified, they began to communicate and cooperate somewhat better with each other. This cooperation has largely continued even after many of these organizations were forced into exile after the massive crackdown on their activities in 2021. The civic initiatives and organizations which emerged in 2020 created the foundation for the further development and institutionalization of Belarusian civil society when the authorities began to use extreme violence against the protesters. They formed new professional associations (for example, of workers or medics) or transformed themselves into civil society organizations with their mission and vision (for example, *Honest People*). Almost three years after the protests, the development of the initiatives that emerged during the wave of protest mobilization has taken different trajectories: some took on conventional forms as associations, foundations, etc.; some still exist in an unregistered state; some have ceased to exist for various reasons ranging from repression to internal contradictions or a loss of interest in civic activity.[65] Nevertheless, the rebirth of civil society in Belarus in 2020 and its new capacity to mobilize a large cross-section of ordinary people indicates that, should the right circumstances be in place, it could once again play a key role in the civic and political life of the country.

Notes

1. Kazakevich, "The Belarusian Non-Party Political System," 353–4.
2. Onuch and Sasse, "The Belarus Crisis" and "The Dynamics of Mass Mobilization"; Kazharski, "Belarus' New Political Nation?"; Moshes and Nizhnikau, "The Belarusian Revolution"; Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election."
3. Shchyttsova, "The Strength of the Strengthless"; Paulovich, "How Feminist is the Belarusian Revolution;" Navumau and Matveieva, "The Gender Dimension of the 2020 Belarusian Protest"; Bekus and Gabowitsch, "Introduction to the Special Issue."
4. Mateo, "All of Belarus has Come Out."
5. Astapova et al., "Authoritarian Cooptation of Civil Society"; Chulitskaya and Bindman, "Social Movements and Political Change."

6. "Societal Fragilities and Resilience."
7. "Introduction: Civil Society."
8. Ibid.
9. Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society"; Narozhna, "Civil Society."
10. Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society" Linz and Stepan, "Problems of Democratic Transition."
11. Doowon, "Civil Society in Political Democratization."
12. Della Porta, "Building Bridges."
13. Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."
14. Heurlin, "Governing Civil Society."
15. "Not All NGOs are Treated Equally," 50.
16. "Floating Control," 379.
17. Plantan, "Not All NGOs"; Squires, "Contingent Symbiosis"; Mertha, "Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0"; He and Thogerson, "Giving the People a Voice?"
18. "Authoritarian Cooptation of Civil Society," 3.
19. "Rethinking Resistance Under Authoritarianism."
20. Keck and Sikkink, "Activists Beyond Borders."
21. "Contentious Politics."
22. Lorentzen, "Designing Contentious Politics"; Chen and Moss, "Authoritarian Regimes."
23. "Building Bridges: Social Movements."
24. Baca, "Practice Theory"; Jacobsen and Saxonberg, "Introduction: The Development of Social Movements."
25. Jacobsen and Saxonberg, "Introduction: The Development of Social Movements," 1.
26. "Authoritarian Cooptation of Civil Society."
27. "Social Movements, 1768–2004."
28. "Understanding Protests in Authoritarianism."
29. "Sources of Authoritarian Resilience."
30. Lai and Sing, "Solidarity and Implications of a Leaderless Movement."
31. Ibid., 51.
32. "The Maidan and Beyond."
33. Ibid., 37.
34. Onuch, Sasse, and Michiels, "Flowers, Tractors, & Telegram," 755.
35. Terzyan, "Belarus in the Wake of a Revolution."
36. Bekus, "Historical Reckoning in Belarus."
37. Silitski, "'Survival of the Fittest'."
38. Douglas, "Belarus: From the Old Social Contract."
39. On 2 April 2015, Lukashenka issued a decree "On Preventing Social Dependency," taxing citizens who were employed less than 183 days in an employment year the equivalent of $184. The Decree was implemented in 2017 and caused a wave of protest in many Belarusian cities. For more see https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/10/belarus-wanted-to-tax-its-unemployed-as-parasites-then-the-protests-started/.
40. Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election."
41. Bindman and Chulitskaya, "Post-Soviet Policy Entrepreneurs?"
42. Astapova et al., "Authoritarian Cooptation of Civil Society."
43. Human Rights Center Viasna ("Spring") is one of the oldest Belarusian Human Rights organisations. In 2022 the head of organisation Ales' Bialiacki became a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. For more information about the organisation see https://spring96.org/en (Accessed 13 February 2024).
44. Danilovich, "Struggling to be Heard."
45. For more on the National strike in 2020 see: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-10-26/belarus-poor-public-response-to-tsikhanouskayas-ultimatum (Accessed 8 January 2025).
46. Bindman and Chulitskaya, "Post-Soviet Policy Entrepreneurs?"
47. Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election."
48. Both crowdfunding platforms ceased their existence after the repression of 2020 due to the political persecution of their founders (including the son of the popular opposition candidate Viktar Babaryka, Eduard Babaryka, who is now a political prisoner). The websites for the initiatives are

not available; however, some of their social media can still be reached: https://www.instagram.com/ulej.by/ or https://www.instagram.com/molamola.by/ (accessed 12 February 2024).
49. USAID, "CSOs Sustainability Index."
50. Moshes and Nizhnikau, "The Belarusian Revolution."
51. Petrova and Korosteleva, "Societal Fragilities and Resilience"; Moshes and Nizhnikau, "The Belarusian Revolution."
52. Kryvoi, "Transformation of Belarus."
53. *Imena* (Names) was a successful social project and platform involved in support of socially vulnerable groups and cases in Belarus. Their website is still available https://imenamag.by (accessed 12 February 2024), however, the project ceased to exist because of repression.
54. Chulitskaya and Rabava, "Between Survival and Standby."
55. "Honest People" (*Sumlennyja liudzi* in Belarusian) is a new civil society organisation which was formed by Belarusians during the runup to the 2020 presidential election who came together with a mission to "build a politically active civil society in Belarus" and to monitor the elections themselves. For more info see https://honestby.org/en.
56. For more on the violence and abuse in response to protest see https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/11/belarus-violence-abuse-response-election-protests (accessed 14 November 2024).
57. Taylor and Crossley, "Abeyance."
58. "Joint statement by the democratic forces of Belarus on the 2025 'election'," Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/news/joint-statement-by-the-democratic-forces-of-belarus-on-the-2025-election.html [accessed 1st November 2024].
59. Hansen and Murphy, "I Feel Like a Fish"; Chulitskaya and Rabava, "Between Survival and Standby."
60. Chulitskaya, "Political Science or Science in the Service of Politics," 261.
61. For example, in 2022 representatives of Minsk Dialogue participated in an expert event organised with the support of the Gorchakov Foundation https://mgimo.ru/about/news/main/minsk-expert-dialog-06-22/?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com (Accessed 13 February 2024).
62. BBC https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53799494 (accessed 11 February 2025).
63. For example, Nasha Niva wrote about at least two leaders of the pro-government trade union in Homel who were subjected to administrative proceedings and lost their official positions. See https://nashaniva.com/351145 (accessed 14 November 2024).
64. Ibid.
65. Chulitskaya and Rabava, "Between Survival and Standby."

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Notes on contributors

Eleanor Bindman, a senior lecturer in politics, writes on civil society development and protest in Russia and Belarus. Among her recent publications are *Belarusian Civil Society Amid National and Regional Crises* (Berlin 2025) and *Post–Soviet Policy Entrepreneurs? The Impact of Non–State Actors on Social Service Reform in Russia and Belarus* (Michigan 2023).

Tatsiana Chulitskaya, a senior researcher at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University (Lithuania). She writes on civil society and public administration in an authoritarian context. Among her recent articles are State Violence and Pains of Punishment: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in Belarus in the Aftermath of the 2020 Protests (Nationalities Papers, 2024) and Social Movements and Political Change in Belarus in 2020 and After (2023).

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List of interviewees and location at time of interview:

X1 – Civic Activist, Vilnius.
I2 – Human Rights Activist, Tbilisi.
X2 – Manager, Vilnius.
B3 – Manager, Vilnius.
Q1 – Designer, Vilnius.
M2 – Student/Civic Activist, Vilnius.
T2 – Journalist, Warsaw.
L1 – Civic Activist, Warsaw.
H1 – Civic and Political Activist, Vilnius.
A1 – Journalist/Political Activist, Vilnius.
N2 – Thinktank Analyst, Tbilisi.
M1 – Civic Activist, Warsaw.
K1 – Political Activist, Warsaw.
L2 – Actor, Tbilisi.
D1 – Civic Activist, Vilnius.
W2 – Lawyer, Warsaw.
B1 – Economist, Vilnius.