



# 2019 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

Belarus

July 2020



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**ICNL**  
INTERNATIONAL CENTER  
FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW

**fhi360**  
THE SCIENCE OF IMPROVING LIVES

Cover Photo: Members of the Beresan Youth Bank present their achievements at the 2018 Annual Civil Society Development Forum, an event organized by Ednannia with support from USAID. The Forum is the largest national platform for learning, communication, and experience sharing among nonprofit organizations in Ukraine, typically bringing together approximately 2,500 participants from the non-profit and private sectors, donor community, media, governmental bodies, and local authorities.

Photo Credit: Ednannia, Ukraine

# 2019 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

For Belarus

July 2020

**Developed by:**

United States Agency for International Development

Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance

Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance

**Acknowledgment:** This publication was made possible through support provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-LA-17-00003.

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A publication of this type would not be possible without the contributions of many individuals and organizations. We are especially grateful to our implementing partners, who played the critical role of facilitating the expert panel meetings and writing the country reports. We would also like to thank the many CSO representatives and experts, USAID partners, and international donors who participated in the expert panels in each country. Their knowledge, perceptions, ideas, observations, and contributions are the foundation upon which this Index is based.

## LOCAL PARTNER

International Educational NGO "ACT"

Vladimir Korzh  
Maryia Lando

## PROJECT MANAGERS

FHI 360

Michael Kott  
Eka Imerlishvili  
Alex Nejadian

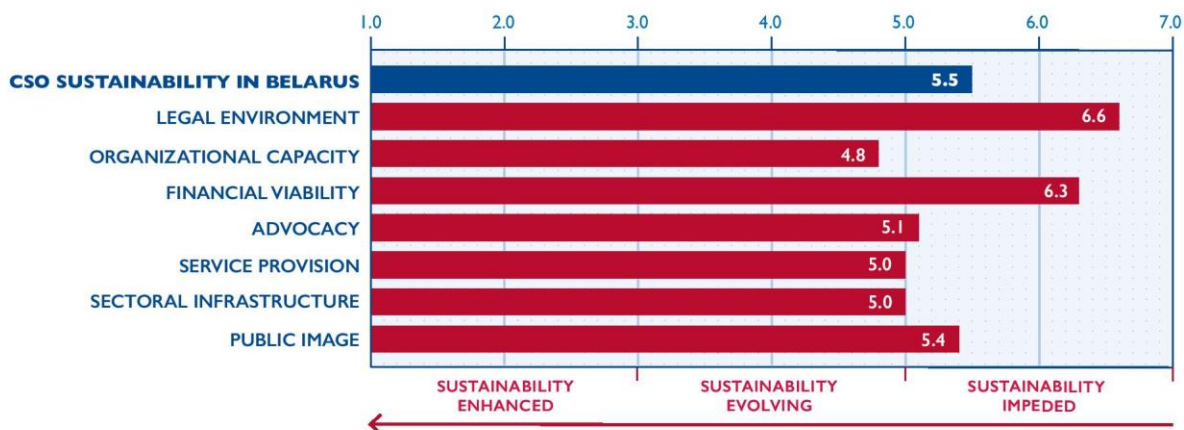
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (ICNL)

Catherine Shea  
Jennifer Stuart

## EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Erin McCarthy, Asta Zinbo, Michael Kott, Jennifer Stuart, and Natalia Shapovalova

## OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 5.5



CSOs in Belarus continued to operate in a difficult environment in 2019. In parliamentary elections held in November, opposition candidates and representatives of democratic CSOs failed to win any seats. The authorities continued to harass CSO activists, journalists, bloggers, and opposition figures through the use of fines, preventive detentions, and administrative arrests, especially in the run-up to the parliamentary elections and during December protests against the country's "deeper integration" with Russia.

CSO sustainability deteriorated slightly in 2019, driven by a decline in organizational capacity. While this remains the sector's strongest dimension, in recent years internal capacity development has become less of a priority for CSOs. CSOs continue to operate in an unfavorable legal environment, depend largely on international grants, and have very limited opportunities to influence the decision-making process. Nevertheless, many CSOs undertook efforts to increase their visibility in 2019, and authorities showed some openness to the demands of active civic groups. CSOs were threatened by growing Russian propaganda both online and on TV in 2019.

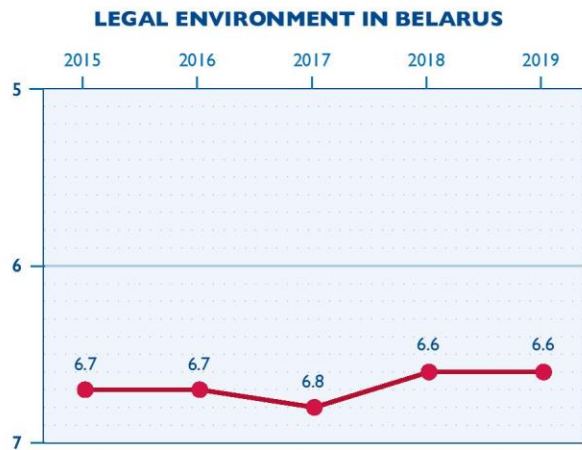
As of January 1, 2020, there were 2,995 registered public associations, including 227 international, 785 national, and 1,983 local associations, as well as 43,545 registered branches of public associations in Belarus. Other registered entities included 25 trade unions, 40 unions (associations) of public associations, 217 foundations, and 7 national governmental public associations. During 2019, 98 new public associations, one union of public associations, and 9 new foundations were registered. A growing number of CSOs register as nonprofit establishments, which are subject to a much simpler registration process than that for other types of organizations. However, no data is available about the number of such organizations.

## LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 6.6

The legal environment for CSOs did not change significantly in 2019 and continues to be highly restrictive. According to the CSO Meter survey conducted by the Assembly of NGOs and Legal Transformation Center Lawtrend, the majority of organizations (79 percent) consider it difficult to operate in Belarus and 73 percent of CSOs face obstacles in their activities imposed by the authorities. A number of legal initiatives were considered during the year, only some of which were adopted.

In December 2018, parliament abolished Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code, which criminalized the activity of unregistered CSOs. This change went into effect in July 2019. However, the ban on the activity of unregistered CSOs remained in force, and violations are subject to fines under Article 23.88 of the Code of Administrative Offences. According to the law, such fines do not require court hearings. There were no reports of unregistered CSOs being fined in 2019.





Highly restrictive draft amendments were proposed to the Law on Public Associations in 2019. The amendments would ban a CSO from using a private house as its official address for registration, require CSOs to publish financial statements, and obligate national-level associations to have registered branches in most oblasts. The amendments would also introduce a few positive changes, including broader possibilities to communicate with state bodies online and a reduction in the minimum number of founders for a republican public association from fifty to forty. The government organized a public discussion on the amendments and the Ministry of Justice created a special working group comprising representatives of a broad range of CSOs, though the group did not include all interested CSOs. Nevertheless, the draft law introduced in the parliament in December

still had all the norms criticized by CSOs.

The draft law also failed to change the existing procedure for registering public associations, which allows the government to refuse registration to any organization with which it is “uncomfortable.” The government uses this provision to refuse registration to unwanted CSOs. In 2019, the government refused to register the public associations Ecobrest and Immortal Regiment. In April, the Supreme Court upheld the Ministry of Justice’s decision not to register Dzeja Research and Enlightenment Public Association, even though the court found that two of the three grounds for refusing registration were baseless. This situation demonstrates that that judicial appeal is not an effective way to protect the rights of CSOs.

Many new CSOs are formed as nonprofit establishments. This type of organization is also subject to arbitrary restrictions. For example, the government often uses the process of approving an establishment’s name to impede the registration of unwanted organizations.

Under current legislation, a CSO must receive a government permit for each foreign donation. A separate permit is required to exempt the assistance from taxes. The government maintains an exhaustive list of acceptable purposes for foreign and domestic support; the list does not include human rights activities, gender equality, or many other CSO goals. According to the law, in some cases violations of the complicated procedure of obtaining approval for foreign assistance are punishable by imprisonment for a term of up to two years.

CSOs do not always make information public about instances in which their applications to register foreign funding are rejected for fear of cultivating a negative image with the government and increasing the likelihood that future projects will be refused registration. During the year, however, at least two CSOs announced that they would return funds received from foreign donors because the Department for Humanitarian Activities refused to register their projects. One of them was the Center for Promotion of Women’s Rights – Her Rights, which returned funding to USAID for a project focused on the empowerment of women and girls.

In 2019, the government considered draft presidential acts regulating international assistance and assistance from domestic business sources. While the public does not have access to the most recent versions of these acts, the legislation allegedly retains the existing procedures for registering foreign assistance.

CSOs face restrictions to the freedom of peaceful assembly, dissemination of opinions, and access to information about the activity of state agencies. In some cases, CSOs are subject to arbitrary arrests, searches of their offices, and other forms of harassment. The Law on Mass Events, which was adopted in July 2018, came into force on January 26, 2019. The law allows mass events to be organized through a simple notification process, rather than requiring advance permission, as long as they are held in venues designated for that purpose by local authorities, which are often remote or inaccessible. The concept of a “mass event” specified in the law is overly broad and now includes cultural and entertainment events, thus CSOs also need to obtain permits to organize tourist rallies, summer camps, and other events. Moreover, the government issued a decree at the beginning of 2019 that introduced a mandatory fee—which was quite high—for services to maintain public order during such events. As a result of these new legal provisions, the number of meetings, rallies, and demonstrations organized by CSOs declined dramatically in 2019. The authorities banned a demonstration and rally by the BPF Party and Amaroka

CSO on Freedom Day, March 24, at Dynamo Stadium. Organizers of the Chernobyl Way rally chose not to organize this annual event in 2019 because of the high rates for the services of militia. During the year, the authorities repeatedly banned events proposed by the March, Babe! initiative opposing domestic violence, even though some of these were to be organized in venues designated by the government for such events.

According to Viasna Human Rights Center, during 2019, the government imposed administrative sanctions 571 times in cases that involved political grounds or when citizens were exercising their civil and political rights. For example, the authorities imposed fines and arrested participants in the December protests against the “deeper integration” of Belarus and Russia.

As in previous years, CSO activists were frequently arrested and searched, especially when entering or leaving the country. Authorities often confiscate data storage devices under the pretext of “checking for extremist materials.” In May, local Sinti and Roma organizations were subject to intense pressure based on ethnic profiling after the death of a road safety officer in Mahileu, allegedly at the hands of three Roma men. Over 100 Roma in the region were detained. As part of this effort, the head of Romano Drom CSO, Volha Niachayeva, was arrested and her house was searched.

Public associations may not engage in business activities. CSOs have the right to participate in some tenders for social services announced by local authorities.

CSOs have limited access to qualified legal aid, including from the Assembly of NGOs and Lawtrend. However, because of a general shift in donor priorities, these organizations have had to reduce the scope of free legal consultations.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.8

In 2019, the organizational capacity of CSOs weakened slightly. While major CSOs have maintained their level of capacity and new CSOs have been established in both large urban areas and other parts of the country, internal capacity development has become less of a priority among both CSOs and donors. Since donor funding for organizational development has become scarcer, CSOs have to invest their own resources in order to build their capacities. As they lack such resources, many ignore capacity development altogether.

Leading CSOs clearly identify their beneficiaries and potential constituents and involve them in their events where possible. This includes most environmental and membership-based organizations, like ZBS Association of Belarusian students, BirdLife Belarus, and Minsk Bicycle Association. Informal CSOs rely on their constituents to maintain their activities. In 2019, however, some CSOs struggled to secure the resources needed to develop their constituencies, while others reduced or ceased their work with constituencies altogether because of the lack of resources.

Most CSOs follow their missions but often shift between different priorities because of their dependence on donors and the availability of funding. Larger and more experienced CSOs engage in strategic planning, but generally use outdated approaches and techniques. Unregistered initiative groups do not see much point in strategic planning. The majority of CSOs do not develop tools to evaluate the implementation of their strategies but do strive to assess the effectiveness of specific activities. A few CSOs including the Office for European Expertise and Communications (OEEC) measure the success of their work in a systematic manner.

Except for nonprofit establishments, all CSOs are legally required to have boards and to define their roles and responsibilities in their statutes. Many organizations, however, fail to distinguish between the roles and responsibilities of board and staff members. As a result, in many CSOs top staff members serve on boards. Larger CSOs continue to develop policies and procedures for their internal management. In 2019, YMCA Belarus adopted gender and inclusion policies and Association of Life-Long Education adopted a membership policy. Many CSOs,



however, do not have such policies, which require time, professional skills, and commitment to develop and implement.

Most CSOs are not able to maintain permanent staff or hire new people because they lack the necessary resources. Most staff is hired on a project basis. Many donors have reduced the share of budgets that can be used for salaries, which forces project teams to do more work for less pay. This has demotivated staff members and increased CSOs' difficulties in hiring staff. Human resource practices regarding job descriptions, vacations, and maternity leave continue to be inadequate. Employees need to develop their skills in project management, monitoring and evaluation, teamwork, and advocacy, but CSOs can rarely afford to pay for their employees to participate in local training or take educational trips. There are few opportunities for leadership training. Some CSO leaders have been in their positions for decades. Leaders in youth organizations change, but these changes often happen so fast that newcomers have no time to learn from their predecessors.

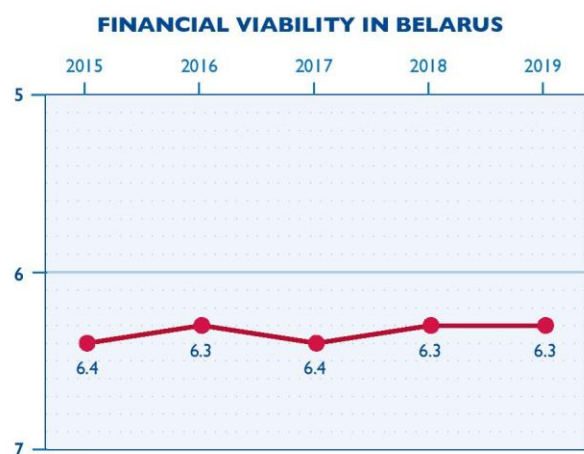
CSOs understand the importance of recruiting and engaging volunteers. Volunteerism is an integral component of the activities of some CSOs, including SOS-Children's Villages and Viasna Human Rights Center. Human Constanta CSO organizes monthly meetings for its volunteers to broaden their expertise and keep them engaged. In summer 2019, the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA organized the annual Volunteer Fest in Minsk with the participation of over 100 volunteers. According to the Charities Aid Foundation's 2019 World Giving Index, the average percentage of Belarusian respondents who reported volunteering in the last ten years is 25 percent.

Many CSOs outsource the professional services of accountants, IT managers, and lawyers, as they are unable to afford to employ them as staff members. There are few qualified accountants who understand the specifics of CSOs, so experienced specialists often work for several CSOs.

CSOs actively use social media and the internet. Staff and volunteers often use personal computers and other equipment because many donors do not allow CSOs to use project funds to buy or upgrade their equipment. CSOs continue to use modern information and communications technology (ICT) including Facebook, Signal, Snapchat, Slack, and Telegram. VKontakte and Odnoklassniki remain the most popular social media platforms in Belarus. While youth CSOs and small local communities widely use VKontakte, only a few CSOs are present on Odnoklassniki. A few CSOs use TikTok as a channel for engaging teenagers and young people. While the use of ICT has brought positive changes to CSO operations, many CSOs do not have the technical abilities to fully utilize all the opportunities.

---

## FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 6.3



Financial viability of CSOs did not change in 2019 and continues to be very fragile. CSOs continue to be highly dependent on international donors, while support from domestic donors is almost non-existent and few organizations are able to conduct income-generating activities.

Legal restrictions limit CSOs' opportunities to receive both foreign and local funding. CSOs must register all grants and donations from abroad, and presidential decrees and edicts specify the allowable goals for which CSOs can receive foreign and corporate funding. Public associations are not allowed to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

There is no accurate data available on the amount of international donor assistance to Belarusian civil society

in 2019. However, local CSOs feel that international assistance has decreased and note that donors increasingly distribute funds to local authorities and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). Donors' policies are changing and now increasingly require CSOs to officially register projects and provide co-funding, which makes it more difficult for CSOs to access this funding.



A growing number of organizations use their websites to raise funds from individuals and some have started to receive regular subscription-based donations. In 2018, Falanster NGO developed an open source tool called Doika, which CSOs can install on their websites to collect donations and membership dues without intermediaries or commission fees. In 2019, only fifteen CSOs used this tool.

CSOs increasingly use crowdfunding mechanisms to engage citizens and collect financial support, but this is still a rare practice. In 2019, 218 new projects were launched on Ulej.by, the biggest crowdfunding platform; 98 of them successfully raised the target amount of money, collecting a total of \$250,000. Ulej launched MolaMola, a new crowdfunding mechanism for individuals, in 2019. At the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020, the BY\_help campaign raised more than \$12,000 via MolaMola to help Belarusians fined and arrested after the December protests; this money was mainly used to pay administrative fines. At the same time, in May, MolaMola blocked the collection of money to pay the criminal fine imposed on blogger Siarhei Petrukhin, explaining that this may be regarded as an attempt by the perpetrator to evade the assigned punishment. The oldest Belarusian crowdfunding platform, Talaka.by, ceased operating in 2019.

Governmental financial support to CSOs is mainly limited to direct and non-transparent funding of state-controlled organizations. Local authorities subsidize CSO social services through the state social contracting mechanism, using funding allocated from the central government. In 2019, the state budget allocated approximately \$440,000 to contract CSO services in social protection and HIV prevention; a total of 123 contracts were signed. While the number of contracts and financial support from the state budget is increasing, this funding remains inaccessible to the majority of Belarusian CSOs.

Some CSOs with established relationships with the government are able to attract in-kind support from the state, mainly in the form of free premises provided by local administrations. Some CSOs are able to generate revenue from the sale of services, including by selling tickets for public events, renting out their premises, and receiving contracts. However, earning income from the sale of goods and services is still a rare practice among CSOs and the funds collected are insufficient to ensure CSO sustainability. For instance, OEEC collected donations through its website and fees for educational events in 2019 but estimates that the resources received from these activities covered less than 5 percent of the organization's total operational costs.

The concept of social entrepreneurship was actively promoted in 2019, mostly through the ongoing efforts of ODB Brussels NGO. The group released a forty-minute film on the state of affairs in the sector; published a manual containing an overview of Belarusian good practices in social entrepreneurship; and, together with Dobra fund, organized a Social Business Forum. The inclusive coffeehouse More than Coffee and bakery Dobrae Pechyva (Good Cookies), both of which employ and train people with mental disabilities, were among the new social enterprises launched in 2019.

Major membership-based organizations collect membership fees. As a rule, the fees are minimal, but occasionally allow CSOs to cover some basic expenses such as office rent.

Several initiatives continue to promote corporate social responsibility and corporate philanthropy in Belarus. The social fund Dobra started the Index of Good, which measures social responsibility among Belarusian companies. Local businesses invested over \$70,000 into social and public benefit projects as part of the Social Weekend contest.

CSOs' financial management systems remain largely unstudied due to the lack of financial transparency and accountability among most Belarusian CSOs. Only a few organizations and public campaigns that rely on crowdfunding share financial reports. For example, Petitions.by platform issues quarterly reports on collected donations. CSOs provide full financial plans and reports to donors.

---

## **ADVOCACY: 5.1**

In 2019, CSO advocacy did not change significantly. While some advocacy efforts were successful, others were ineffective.

The Mothers 328 movement successfully fought against unfair sentences under the anti-narcotics law in 2019. It met with the minister of the interior and the head of the Presidential Administration, ultimately leading to parliament amending Article 328 of the Criminal Code to mitigate the sentences. In addition, President Alexander

Lukashenko publicly promised to pardon those already convicted. In Brest, citizens successfully protested to shut down the IPower battery factory because of the harm it posed to the environment and people's health. According to the annual review *Belarus in Focus*, due to cooperation between the government and experts of the non-governmental Kastychnicki Economic Forum (KEF), most of the population now agrees on the need for reforms to move Belarus towards a market economy.

The March, Babe! initiative advocated for the law against domestic violence by organizing public campaigns and appearing on international platforms. These efforts attracted significant media attention. As a result of these efforts, March, Babe! was able to meet officially with the foreign minister and deputy minister of internal affairs in 2019, and one of the new members of parliament expressed his support for such a law. Another civic initiative, the Youth Bloc, which was founded by CSOs in the fall of 2019, actively advocated around issues related to education, military service, and the mitigation of anti-drug legislation in the elections. Despite their activism, however, neither March, Babe! nor the Youth Bloc achieved any concrete results.

In December 2019, several thousand people participated in a series of demonstrations in Minsk to protest deeper integration with Russia. The protests were organized by the Fresh Wind campaign and opposition politicians in response to meetings between Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin at which issues of integration and energy were discussed. The two presidents failed to reach agreement on any of these issues, and in the following months, street protests ceased. During the December 2019 protests, the authorities largely refrained from harassment, but in 2020 many of the participants in the protests were punished with heavy fines and administrative arrests.

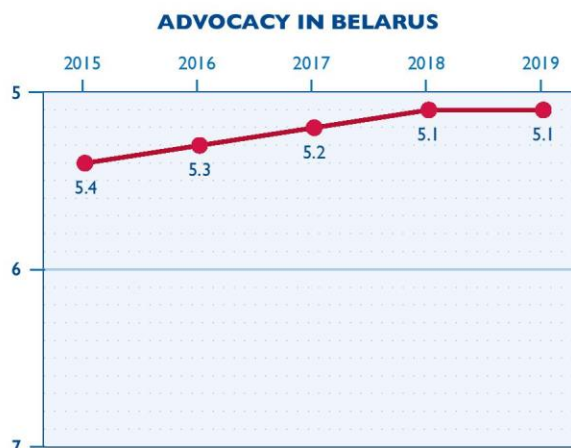
There are no effective mechanisms for lobbying and advocacy in Belarus. The Law on Normative Legal Acts came into force in 2019. The law establishes minimum time limits for conducting public discussions, obliges state bodies to publish the results of public discussions, and regulates mechanisms of online discussions. In practice, however, it has not increased CSOs' opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Ministries continued to organize public discussions on their websites, although these did not produce any significant impact on important issues in 2019. The authorities occasionally invite individual experts to meetings and working groups. For example, the Coalition for Dignified Longevity and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection work together on the National Strategy for Active Longevity. However, this practice is very selective.

Almost every government agency has a public council with the participation of CSOs. However, these councils do not operate according to uniform standards or regulatory principles, the selection criteria for CSOs are unclear and biased, and selection procedures are not transparent. The mandates of public councils are generally extremely limited, and discussions may not affect future decisions. The CSO Meter 2019 survey finds that 30 percent of CSOs participate in public councils, while the rest do not even attempt to become members of such councils.

In the parliamentary elections of 2019, some civic activists were not registered as candidates, while others were allowed to run for office, but were not elected.

In 2019, the Coordinating Council of Public Family Forces of Belarus, an ultra-conservative coalition of seven CSOs, actively advocated against the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals, abortion, in vitro fertilization (IVF), and programs for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, especially among Christian communities. By the end of the year, they had collected 30,000 signatures calling for the criminalization of information about LGBTI people. At the same time, the illiberal initiative Immortal Regiment was less active in 2019 and was denied registration as a formal public association.

Online activism is increasingly popular among Belarusians, in part because other opportunities and mechanisms are ineffective and hard to use. According to a survey by Human Constanta and Baltic Internet Policy Initiative, 48 percent of Belarusian internet users have used the internet to participate in a community with similar interests, 35 percent have participated in online discussions, and 20 percent have signed online petitions. According to the 2019 study "Public Organizations and Citizens' Initiatives: Potential for Participation," prepared by the Baltic Internet Policy Initiative and OEEC, more than 60 percent of respondents were willing to help solve urgent problems in the

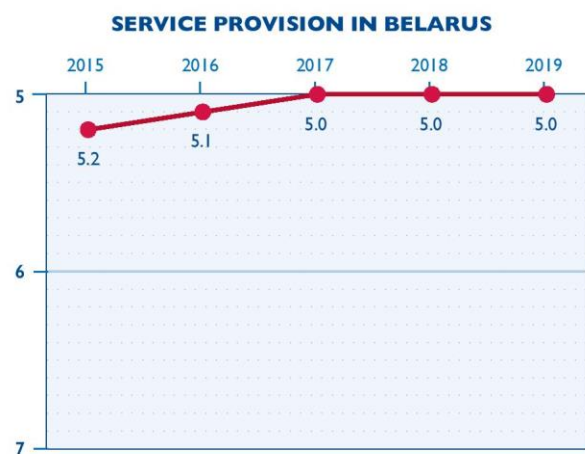


in local communities by signing petitions. In 2019, 709 petitions were organized on the Petitions.by platform. The popularity of the Petitions.by platform allowed it to finance its operations in 2019 through users' donations.

Belarusian CSOs are not widely engaged in advocacy efforts aimed at promoting a more favorable legal and regulatory framework for the sector. Only a few CSOs including Lawtrend, Assembly of NGOs, and ACT International Educational NGO took part in public discussions of the Law on Public Associations, which the Council of Ministers sent to parliament at the end of 2019. In June, twenty-five CSOs sent a collective appeal to the Council of Ministers protesting the unjustified collection of contributions to the Social Protection Fund.

---

## SERVICE PROVISION: 5.0



CSO service provision did not change in 2019. The CSO sector continues to provide a diverse range of services including social services, civic education, environmental protection, regional development, legal aid, and capacity building of the sector. However, the scope, outreach, and effectiveness of CSO services are not sustainable because most organizations rely on funding from international donors and generally cannot provide services to all who need them.

CSOs, especially those that provide educational and informational services, have successfully broadened the range of activities they provide for different target groups. For example, in 2019 the Republican Association of Wheelchair Users launched a special website [Mamapapa.by](http://Mamapapa.by) where people with spinal cord injuries can

find information and get consultations on issues such as sexuality, fertility, and reproductive health. Human Constanta and Legal Initiative CSOs offered city quests and pub quizzes on human rights. During the year, several organizations and groups of activists launched podcasts, including FemFM, Dzigital, and We Haven't Finished. A growing number of CSOs provided online and blended training courses. For example, the School of Young Managers of Public Administration (SYMPA) offered an online course called Modern Theories and Practices of Public Administration and Public Policy and OEEC launched an online course on building local communities.

Many CSOs strive to determine the needs of their clients and target groups so they can develop appropriate services or refocus their services to make them more effective. However, needs assessments are generally done in an informal and non-systematic manner. As most CSOs lack competencies in data collection and evaluation, few are able to demonstrate their contributions to local needs.

Belarusian CSOs provide services to a much wider audience than their members. In January, Press Club Belarus launched Media IQ, which monitors media compliance with journalistic standards and the availability of propaganda. Center for Environmental Solutions provides consultations to businesses to help them shape their environmental policies. Academics and government officials use the expertise of think tanks. Specialists from government agencies regularly participate in the trainings of socially oriented CSOs.

As a rule, CSOs do not intentionally discriminate when providing their goods and services, but there are instances of unconscious discrimination. For example, many CSOs have offices in buildings or organize events in spaces that are not fully accessible, and information about CSO services is not always accessible to all groups of society. During 2019, CSOs increasingly discussed nondiscriminatory approaches, inclusive practices, and the promotion of cross-cutting values.

A growing number of CSOs try to recover the costs of service provision by charging fees and signing contracts, but the amounts received do not cover the majority of costs. Such CSOs are mostly registered as establishments; public associations are legally prohibited from engaging in business activity.

The demand by state bodies for CSO expertise and services, such as analysis from independent think tanks and environmental CSOs or training for social workers, is growing, but government recognition and appreciation of the contribution of CSOs is still very limited. In December, the Third Sector Center received a commendation

from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection for its work on the development of volunteerism and implementation of socially important projects.

## SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 5.0

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector did not change significantly in 2019. While CSOs have access to various support services, there are still no long-term, comprehensive programs that support different types of CSOs.

Several active and experienced intermediary support organizations (ISOs), networks, and umbrella organizations provide training, consultations, and informational and technical support to Belarusian CSOs. Among them are the Assembly of NGOs, New Eurasia Foundation, ODB Brussels, OEEC, and the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA. Organizations such as the Agency of Regional Development Dzedzich in Brest, the Third Sector Center in Grodno, and Kola Center in Mogilev, serve as resource centers for CSOs and activists in their regions. CSO infrastructure organizations continue to depend on foreign funding; have limited capacities, scope of services, and outreach; and are located mainly in big cities. As a rule, ISOs provide services for free, although a few collect small fees (\$5 to \$10) from the participants of training programs.

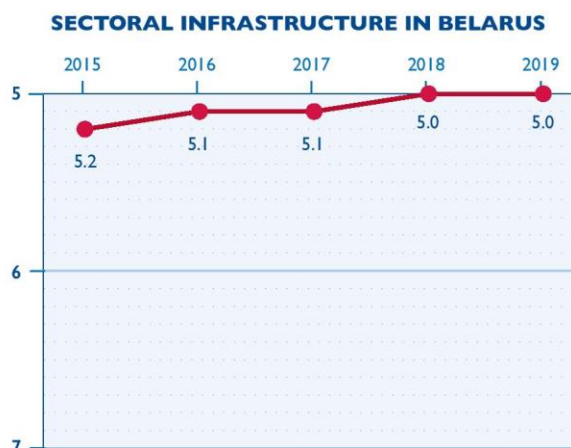
A new public space called Territory of Rights opened in Minsk at the end of 2018 and hosted more than 170 events organized by pro-democratic CSOs free of charge in 2019. This has catalyzed the emergence of some new CSO initiatives. For example, every Monday, the Volunteer Service of Viasna Human Rights Center organized meetings of its English-speaking club on human rights issues there.

Belarusian CSOs re-grant funds to local organizations and initiatives under some large foreign-funded projects. In 2019, Belarusian Human Rights House awarded many small, large, and research grants focused on the promotion of human rights and democratic values with funding from the EU. DVV International re-granted funds from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support projects that helped to expand access to education in the penitentiary system. The Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities awarded mini-projects focused on independent living for people with disabilities with funding from the EU. Belarusian businesspeople and companies awarded \$50,000 through the fourteenth Social Weekend contest for social initiatives.

CSOs have access to a pool of professional experts, consultants, and trainers in management and fundraising. In April, twenty-seven CSO representatives completed a six-month advanced education course in NGO Management organized by the New Eurasia Foundation and School of Business of the Belarusian State University. In 2019, there were also several trainings in specialized areas of CSO activities, like storytelling or nonprofit law. However, existing training programs do not address all of the sector's needs. CSOs, especially new ones, lack basic training on management, accounting, financial management, and monitoring and evaluation. There is also limited advanced specialized trainings for experienced CSO managers in areas such as modern management approaches, communications, advocacy, and using ICT for the development of civic activism and fundraising.

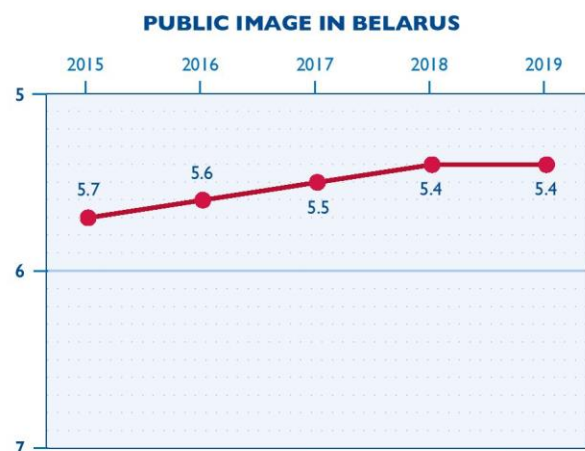
Cooperation and partnership in the CSO sector continue to increase. In 2019, CSOs created coalitions for specific events like Idea Generation Camp or Zero Discrimination Day; shared information and plans via chats, groups in social networks, special meetings, and networking events; implemented joint projects; and worked together on advocacy initiatives. Six CSOs addressing LGBTI issues formed an as yet unnamed coalition to coordinate strategies and promote a shared agenda.

In 2019, CSOs formed a number of intersectoral partnerships, mainly with the private sector and media. In summer, the Assembly of NGOs worked with organizers of the Viva Braslav open air music festival to offer a space where eleven CSOs could present their work to attendees of the festival. Within the IdeaLab event, media experts helped CSOs design and plan creative media campaigns to increase their visibility. The CSO Center of



Urban Initiatives, the local Executive Committee, and Alivaria brewery company conducted the Big City Picnic in Mogilev. As in previous years, top government officials regularly participated in civil society events. CSOs and local authorities implemented joint projects, mostly aimed at infrastructure and regional development. CSOs' interaction with businesses and state bodies continues to depend primarily on personal contacts.

## PUBLIC IMAGE: 5.4



The CSO sector's public image did not change significantly in 2019.

During the year, independent media covered a wide range of CSO-related topics, including the participation of activists in advocacy campaigns and public protests. TUT.by, a major online platform, published a series of articles about the achievements of Belarusian CSOs. CityDog, an online magazine, continued to publish its Grass Roots rubric about CSO initiatives and opportunities for the public to participate in them. Government-controlled media primarily covered local activism focused on neighborhood improvements. State-owned ONT TV channel produced stories about local activists and their initiatives in small towns as part of a special project.

Russian propagandistic media published a growing number of fake news stories and materials discrediting Belarusian civil society. Moreover, some Belarusian Telegram channels and bloggers made negative posts about CSO activists.

Public awareness of CSOs and participation in their activities is still quite low. According to the annual national survey commissioned by Pact, only 3 percent of Belarusians participated in CSO activities in 2019, the same percentage as in 2018. Awareness about CSOs has grown slightly and reached 32 percent, up from 26 percent in 2018, with the best known organizations being charities, youth, environmental, and animal protection groups. Comparable figures are higher among internet users. According to a survey by Baltic Internet Policy Initiative and OEEC, 20 percent of respondents participated in the activity of CSOs and 71 percent are aware of their activity.

While actual participation levels are still low, Belarusians are theoretically willing to take part in CSO activities and other forms of civic participation. According to the above survey by Pact, 28 percent of respondents are ready to participate in CSO activities, 46 percent in socially beneficial civic activities, and 52 percent in activities that address issues of concern in their local communities. In response to a similar question in Pact's 2018 survey, 53.5 percent of respondents indicated their readiness to participate in activities addressing issues of concern in local communities. The key reasons for the low levels of civic activity include insufficient information on opportunities for engagement and the belief that change is not possible.

In 2019, CSOs organized a great number of mass festivals and conferences to engage Belarusians in civic activism and promote it as a "fashionable concept." For example, the Minsk Cycling Society organized Viva Rovar!, a bike carnival; the Assembly of NGOs organized a Kilometer of Civic Activism, a public festival at which CSOs could present their activities to the public; and the initiative Edcamp Belarus organized the 3rd Edcamp Unconference for school teachers.

The government's perception of the CSO sector did not change in 2019. As before, in most cases, any collaboration is initiated by CSOs, rather than the authorities. Officials at various levels continued to participate in events conducted by CSOs. For the second consecutive year, President Alexander Lukashenko participated in the European Security Forum organized by the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations.

As in previous years, businesses trust certain CSOs but do not consider the sector as a whole as a partner for joint events, advocacy, or access to vulnerable groups. According to a survey of the Belarusian corporate social responsibility (CSR) market by Civitta/SATIO and the Dobra fund, businesses still give priority to charity, i.e. direct assistance to vulnerable populations, instead of supporting CSOs. Businesses do not support activities involving



politics or potential conflict with the authorities and sometimes get involved in conflicts with CSOs, especially environmental activists.

In 2019, CSOs further increased their presence in the media, including traditional media, social networks, Telegram and YouTube channels, and podcasts, in order to highlight their activities and convey socially important messages. CSOs attracted media and public attention through a number of creative events and tools during the year. In December 2019, organizers of the March, Babe! initiative placed dozens of orange shoes and boots in the central square of Minsk to represent victims of domestic violence. The first inclusive on-line series Who, If Not Us presented persons with disabilities as the main characters who tackled everyday problems on their own; the series was created by an activist with disabilities with support from USAID. Independent bloggers play an increasingly important role in highlighting the civic agenda.

To improve the visibility of the civil sector, every year CSOs organize awards ceremonies to celebrate the best organizations and initiatives. These include Civil Society Champions, Zrabili (We've Done It) grassroots award, Rada Awards, and awards for regional activists in Vitebsk and Brest.

Nevertheless, CSOs still lack a systematic approach to promoting their image and few engage professionals to manage their public relations activities. Most CSOs do not have sufficient capacity to create newsworthy events, interact with subscribers on social media, or respond to conflicts that become public.

CSOs increasingly understand the importance of transparency; however, very few organizations publish annual reports and hardly any organizations publish financial statements. Despite growing discussion about CSO values, there is still no common code of ethics for CSOs, and there were no attempts to draft one in 2019.

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.

**U.S. Agency for International Development**

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20523

Tel: (202) 712-0000

Fax: (202) 216-3524

[www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov)