

Cooperation Within Belarusian Civil Society: Will You (N)ever Walk Alone?

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Abstract: Belarusian civil society, which operates in various geographical and substantive modalities, is, on the one hand, a fairly “close-knit circle” where many are well-acquainted and interact with each other on a personal level. On the other hand, there are not many examples of both intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral institutional cooperation. According to a survey conducted by Lawtrend at the end of 2022, 43% of organizations reported affiliation with both Belarusian and international umbrella structures, 21% indicated affiliation solely with Belarusian structures, and 5% indicated affiliation only with international associations.

Overall, we can say that there are examples and practices of institutional cooperation within Belarusian civil society on various bases. For instance, some associations have formed horizontally, based on internal demand, while others have formed vertically, under external influence. However, how functional are these associations? Why are they created? Do the reasons for their creation affect the outcomes of cooperation within the sector? Are there currently opportunities for such cooperation not only outside but also within Belarus?

In this study, we aim to answer these and other questions, with the broader goal of analyzing the opinions of representatives of Belarusian civil society and the expert community on what cooperation in civil society is, its existing forms and practices, and the prospects for such cooperation. From February 26 to March 15, 2024, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the expert community and CSO, who have experience in intra-sectoral cooperation.

We can tentatively argue that today, the most prominently voiced position in the public sphere advocates for Belarusian civil society to function more as a political entity with a defined structure, leadership, and the goal of promoting democratic change in Belarus. This vision finds practical expression in certain civil society projects supported by donors, and is being developed by a segment of Belarusian organizations and activists creating corresponding infrastructure. This infrastructure includes the division of civil society into specific sub-sectors or clusters that unite organizations and activists working on similar themes. Intra-sectoral cooperation (in various forms) is structured into specific hierarchies and serves as a tool for constructing civil society. Within this research, we provisionally identified such organizations and activists as proponents of the “vertical” approach. It should be noted that the position of proponents of this approach was most clearly articulated and reproduced in the interviews conducted.

In parallel to this, there exists a vision of civil society (and its associations) as a space for the activities of various organizations and initiatives whose work is directed towards realizing their missions and engaging with target groups. This approach is conditionally classified as “horizontal”. Within the “horizontal” approach, civil society is seen as a sector of public life divided into different areas of activity. Cooperation in the civil society is viewed as an opportunity for achieving missions, enhancing operational efficiency, practically expanding access to resources and target audiences, among other benefits.

The topic of intra-sectoral cooperation is primarily relevant for the segment of civil society operating outside Belarus. Within Belarus itself, there is limited space and opportunity for practical alliances or discussions on this topic.