**Date:** September 15, 2020

Belarus is experiencing a difficult but promising time. The events taking place in Belarus and how the political crisis will be solved will have implications beyond its borders. EU support and solidarity are very important in the current context, where citizens face threats to life and liberty, but also immense psychological pressure while fighting for their rights and freedoms and for the restoration of justice. **Financial support** to victims of repressions in Belarus and those who have been pushed to leave the country, as well as to civil society, is crucial.

We are seeing an historically high level of **self-organisation** of Belarusian society, and this potential need not to be wasted. The social movement in Belarus today includes millions of people, from all social strata of the population, and all regions and cities. Indeed, there has been a quality change in the state of Belarusian society: political participation has replaced political passivity; a big wave of solidarity has emerged; and organisation from above has been replaced with self-organisation from below. Inside this social movement, there are already several types of self-organised structures:

* Grassroots initiatives and communities organised geographically, including local groups of self-organised inhabitants of streets, neighbourhoods, and election districts. The quantity of these groups measures in the thousands, and the number of people involved in the hundreds of thousands;
* Groups of citizens organised according to their profession, such as communities of teachers, medical workers, scientists, sportsmen, cultural workers, workers, women employees, motorists, and more;
* Volunteer initiatives of various kinds, from youth groups to groups of medical workers, rendering first aid and support to victims;
* Solidarity groups, including initiatives such as "Solidarity Foundation" and “BY\_HELP” and numerous groups of volunteers who provide financial, legal, and psychological assistance and help with professional reorientation;
* Hubs that connect initiatives with each other, for example, linking striking plant and factory workers who suffered from repressions with initiatives that help the families of workers in difficult situations.

The EU needs to support the population of Belarus, currently standing alone against an extremely oppressive state, and support citizens’ initiatives aiming to help the victims of repression, and restore their rights. A **viable civic space and civil society support** needs to be provided, which will serve as a solid foundation for the new Belarus in the long run.

Financial support provided to the Belarusian people should be channelled away from the state authorities that have been compromised by violent actions against the people, human rights violations and participation in the falsification of the elections. Namely, the EU's **EUR 50 million COVID-19 emergency support for Belarus** should be repurposed and distributed via alternative actors, including local CSOs, diaspora organisations, and well-established EU CSOs. There are sufficient **absorption and operational capacities** among Belarusian CSOs to work with large amounts of funding - both have improved dramatically in recent years and months, also due to the need to respond to the COVID-19 emergency, substituting state structures.

It is important to find ways to ensure that the support aimed at addressing human rights violations reaches its beneficiaries in the **restrictive environment of Belarus**. A number of donors, organisations, and informal initiatives have found ways on delivering support to those who need it, yet there are undeniable dangers connected to receiving foreign support, thus it is important to be mindful of the security of recipients. However the fear to jeopardise the recipients should not prevent the substantial support from coming.

Below we provide a non-exhaustive list of challenges that Belarusian civil society in general and a number of sectors such as education, media and youth are facing. We also present possible solutions, as suggested by civil society experts from Belarus in the discussions and events held by the EaP CSF in recent weeks.

**General challenges for civil society:**

* Repressionand increased pressure on activists and civil society organisationsin recent weeks due to their participation in protests;
* Frequent unjustified calls and visits from the department dealing with economic crimes under the Ministry of the Interior to the offices of CSOs receiving foreign assistance;
* Difficulty accessing funds due to closed borders - many Belarusian CSOs are registered abroad and therefore have accounts in foreign banks;
* COVID-19 related challenges while travelling to the EU member states - Belarusian CSOs and activists often need to travel for work, yet the fee for compulsory COVID-19 tests (approximately EUR 70-80) is often too high to cover;
* Impossibility to register foreign aid in the country - the new law on foreign funding has further limited the possibilities for receiving funds from abroad;
* Operational difficulties due to staff and volunteers being imprisoned, while the need for CSO action has grown considerably, including to cover humanitarian needs (medicine, shelters in case of repressions, etc.) and provide legal help (documentation of tortures, legal aid, consultations to victims, etc.);
* Deliberate targeting of women activists in particular by the authorities.

**Possible solutions in the short-term:**

* Create an enabling environment in the EU member states, in particular in the neighbouring countries, for Belarusian activists to register CSOs, including by providing legal assistance to support registration procedures;
* Waive the fee for national visas of the EU member states and simplify the travel procedures imposed due to COVID-19 for CSO representatives;
* Implement visa facilitation measures or a visa free regime for Belarusian citizens, as suggested by the Visegrad Four (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia);
* Provide free COVID-19 tests for Belarusian CSOs and activists arriving in EU member states, thus exempting them from the two-week quarantine period;
* Reinforce the social movement and EU-Belarus solidarity through support to local, national and professional volunteer initiatives (self-organised groups of lawyers, doctors, teachers, etc.) Some groups, including online solidarity platforms, may require capacity building and advice on how to develop further and work with volunteers, while others may need support to hire professional staff;
* Support capacity building on crisis management and managing volunteers for CSOs;
* Support programmes with a humanitarian purpose, such as rehabilitating victims of torture, rendering psychological support to repressed members of civil society, and assisting civil society leaders forced to flee Belarus;
* Provide medical support to victims of torture and their families in the EU member states; given actual and potential difficulties in coordinating medical evacuations with the Belarusian authorities, member statess could work directly with EU-based air companies and medical institutions to arrange for transport and treatment without special medical evacuation planes, where these are not strictly (medically) necessary;
* Support Belarusian civil society working in exile in EU member states;
* Extend eligibility for support via the EU’s COVID-19 assistance package to victims of repressions (including private sector and state employees who have been laid off and those who stepped down themselves due to their civic position) and their families. Factory workers, members of the strike committees, teachers, academics, cultural workers and many others would all fall into this category;
* Consider increasing support for women’s rights and women’s self-organisation in light of the central role of women in the ongoing social mobilisation in Belarus.

**Challenges in the area of education:**

* The Ministry of Education of Belarus has served and continues to serve as a tool of repression against schools, teachers, pupils, parents and students. Having contributed to the falsification of the presidential elections, citizens’ trust in Belarus’ education system is waning;
* It is challenging to preserve professional human resources due to continuous layoffs and exclusions from the education sector of managers, teachers, professors and academics for political reasons - access to education for students expelled or unable to continue their education in secondary schools, vocational and higher education has to be secured through adequate staffing, among other factors;
* In the current political situation, any manifestations of innovation, civic position, or aspirations for freedom, both on the part of teachers and school management and on the part of students, are suppressed;
* The educational system of Belarus requires transformation; the current system is characterised by outdated methods, institutions, and educational content that require reform. Any transformation should be based on replacing control with trust, isolation with solidarity, management from above with initiatives from below, and suppression of individuality with diversity.

**Solutions:**

* Support the development of human resources and quality educational content beyond the official system of education of Belarus;
* Provide access to education for those who are expelled or unable to continue their education in secondary school or vocational and higher education by covering their fees in private schools (at approximately 500 EUR per month, this is not affordable to average Belarusians), supporting home-schooling programmes and civic education programmes conducted by CSOs, and providing scholarships for programmes in the EU member states;
* Support retraining programmes for those laid off for political reasons and willing to change their career - free requalification programmes for workers to become IT experts and programmers are already offered by Belarusian IT companies, yet more programmes of this kind are needed;
* Support bottom-up reform of education and the creation of structures and institutions within the non-governmental sphere to work on the new education system, including the development of large scale educational programmes;
* Support teachers’ associations and parents’ initiatives;
* Support training and retraining of teachers and managers who were expelled or resigned on their positions;
* Invest in civic education and the development of essential skills such as critical thinking and fact-checking by:
	+ Supporting the design of modern curricula, as well as training for teachers so that they can benefit from new technologies, focusing primarily on teachers who mobilise and want to bring about change to the educational system;
	+ Supporting the design of innovative and engaging online courses, as well as content for social media platforms, making use of new technologies and new methods of work like gamification.

**Challenges for independent media:**

* Pressure on the media has intensified and is growing. At the beginning of protests, journalists from opposition media were targeted but later on, all independent media that cover public or political events started to feel the pressure;
* In the period from May to August, the Belarusian Association of Journalists recorded 133 cases of serious violations of the rights of journalists;
* Many journalists from foreign media (30 documented cases so far) were unable to obtain accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their applications were ignored;
* During the protests, police and special forces deliberately detained and used violence against journalists. Some journalists were deliberately injured by rubber bullets and flash grenades;
* On August 27, during protests in Minsk and Brest, police detained 44 journalists. Later, many of them who work for foreign media were stripped of their accreditation, and three were arrested for three days for participating in protests;
* There are cases of pressure on striking journalists employed by state media. Many of them were fired, some were arrested for participating in protests;
* The authorities have been blocking access to the websites of many independent media outlets;
* There are cases of refusal to print newspapers and distribute them by mail and the regular state-owned distribution network;
* Online media outlets that are still accessible keep receiving warnings from the Ministry of Information and may soon be blocked.

**Solutions:**

* Provide the media sector with urgent financial and technical support, including purchases of new equipment;
* Support the creation of a print media distribution system independent of the state;
* Enhance support to Belarusian media broadcasting from abroad. In the absence of an internet connection, it is very important to be able to receive information via satellite or radio;
* Support the creation of a media consortium that will produce independent audiovisual products in Belarus. This will provide an opportunity to strengthen the editorial offices of the media, and provide journalists with jobs and the necessary equipment;
* Support educational programmes and psychological assistance for journalists;
* Support mechanisms to relocate journalists in the event of a threat to their life or health.

**Challenges for youth and youth organisations:**

* Youth organisations lack resources for covering their office costs and organisational work, in part due to border closures and obstacles to obtaining visas;
* Youth organisations lack equipment, much of it having been used during peaceful actions and been seized or damaged by police, including sound systems, megaphones, computers and telephones of those who were imprisoned;
* Participants of peaceful actions and strikers at work places and in education institutions are put under pressure by the authorities. For example, in some cases, university administrations have allowed police into the university buildings, and threatened students and workers with expulsion and dismissal;
* It is impossible to continue the implementation of youth oriented projects as they were planned because of COVID-19 and the political crisis;
* Activists who participate in and/or conduct peaceful actions in the streets are arrested by the police. Victims have been sentenced to up to 15 days of administrative arrest, and some of them have experienced repeated arrests.

**Solutions:**

* Increase support for youth-oriented information campaigns about their rights, and about potential legal instruments and peaceful actions against violations of rights, including legal support and assistance to the victims of repressions;
* Support an information campaign abroad about the situation in Belarus, coupled with global solidarity campaigns to support Belarusian youth;
* Increase solidarity payments for sacked young workers; there is already a fund to pay three months of salary to those laid off from their job due to their political convictions, but there is not enough funding overall;
* Prepare education schemes and scholarship opportunities for expelled students (a wave of expulsions is predicted to begin from September 15), charging a consortium of decision makers from independent youth organisations such as RADA and Student Alliance  with verifying that students were indeed repressed;
* Support medical rehabilitation and shelters abroad for activists and volunteers who suffered from violence, torture, and other trauma in police custody;
* Support psychological help and continuous assistance for activists and volunteers who work in Belarus;
* Support crisis management for youth CSOs, to help them respond to the highly dynamic and volatile current crisis;
* Push Belarusian universities' administrations and the Ministry of Education to allow students unbridled freedom of expression, both directly and through the Bologna committee.

**More Information**

*The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. The EaP CSF is a non-partisan bona fide non-governmental organisation. For more information, please visit the EaP CSF website at*[*www.eap-csf.eu*](http://eap-csf.eu/)

Include a short paragraph about your organization and the goals it hopes to achieve. It is obligatory to include a link to the EaP CSF website, and the paragraph about it above.