

State and Current Needs of Belarusian Think Tanks

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The aim of this research was to describe the current state of Belarusian think tanks (both those that operate or used to operate in Belarus and those that have had to operate abroad since they were founded), estimate their potential, analyze the main issues they face, and identify their actual needs. The empirical basis for the research is 10 interviews with the heads or key analysts of Belarusian think tanks. The interviews were conducted in September-November 2021.

Context and External Conditions

Belarusian think tanks operate in various spheres: international relations, security, political studies, public administration, economy, culture, civil society, identity, etc. The think tanks are part of the Belarusian civil society, which was hit by a crackdown in 2020 and, especially, in 2021, which led to numerous civil society organizations (CSOs) of various types and organizational forms being dissolved and many of their employees, members, and activists being forced to leave the country¹. As of November 17, 2021, according to Lawtrend, 154 nonprofit institutions and 124 public organizations, associations, and foundations had been dissolved or were in the process of being dissolved (including think tanks). In addition, some experts and analysts were arrested:

- Tatsiana Kuzina – was charged under Article 361 of the Criminal Code “Calls for actions aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus” and Part 1 of Article 357 of the Criminal Code “Conspiracy to seize power unconstitutionally”. She was recognized as a political prisoner;
- Valeryia Kastsiuhova – was charged under the same articles as Tatsiana Kuzina. Recognized as a political prisoner;
- Uladzimir Matskevich - Article 342 of the Criminal Code “Organization and preparation of actions that severely violate public order, or active participation in them”. Recognized as a political prisoner;
- Tatsiana Vadalazhskaya, Ulad Vialichka, Aksana Shelest were all detained and subsequently released, but remain subjects in a criminal case.

Both the political and legal conditions of work have deteriorated, as have the economic and media conditions (including due to the "cleansing" of the media sphere). The research sector has been systematically discredited by the state media. For example, many publications in a state-owned newspaper Belarus Today, whose founder is the Presidential Administration, contain threats, discrediting statements, or even personal insults. There have been at least a dozen such publications since the beginning of 2021. In addition, in the fall of 2021, a trend emerged of replacing suppressed sectors (CSOs as well as specific sectors - human rights protection, think tanks, and the media) with organizations that are loyal to the authorities. Similar plans are being discussed for the research sector².

¹ http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/csos_survey_report_public.pdf

² In particular, see <https://www.sb.by/articles/privkus-tsvetnykh-revoljutsiy.html>

The Ecoom center has been active in the state media space lately. Ecoom has been conducting sociological research commissioned by the authorities since early 2000s with obvious methodological violations. Another example is Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS). BISS is a state think factory created in 2019 to replace Presidential Administration's Information and Analysis Center. Since 2021, BISS analysts have been actively present in the state information space, commenting on current events, presenting analytical reviews and studies' results, including sociological ones.

Current State. Organizational Capacity of Belarusian Think Tank Sector.

In September-November 2021 when the interviews were conducted, none of the organizations covered by the study remained "untouched" by repression. Only those organizations that were closely connected to state bodies and supported authorities' policies during the political crisis avoided the fate of being dissolved. A number of them retained their registration status despite having received funding from EU and U.S. foundations.

However, all the Belarusian think tanks that were active at the moment of the 2020 political crisis outbreak continue their work today, in one form or another and with various compositions of experts. Those that were initially registered and operated abroad did not experience any particular changes in their work format. On the other hand, those organizations that had been registered and/or physically located in Belarus had to reorganize their activities' format as a result of the crackdown. As of today, most experts working for independent think tanks (registered either inside or outside Belarus before the total closure of CSOs) have left the country. Thus, the starting positions of think tanks were different, and nowadays almost all of them have a large number of employees outside the country for various reasons.

Expectedly, the organizational potential of both individual organizations and the sector as a whole was seriously affected. Organizations have lost part of their people (repressions, fears/impossibility to work and burnout among those who stayed in Belarus, internal conflicts, outflow to "safer" sectors); their work infrastructure in Belarus (registration status; agreements with partners; registered international technical assistance projects; offices; partially, equipment). There were also problems with managerial processes, fundraising, planning, access to information, and other aspects of organizations' activities.

To build up an "organizational routine" abroad, the organizations that left Belarus used the help of their partners that were already present in their respective host countries. Organizations that now have staff both inside and outside Belarus can assign Belarusian colleagues only the "safest" tasks (non-public, not related to finances or other sensitive topics), and constantly take care of their safety, including imposing some self-restrictive measures.

Think tanks, as well as other Belarusian CSOs, mastered remote work when the coronavirus crisis started, and this, to some extent, has helped them to organize their work in the distributed workforce environment. However, today, this modus operandi is also strengthened by the partially closed borders of Belarus (which poses a problem for Belarusian

experts), and the online format of many events, which were previously held in person and provided opportunities for experts to communicate and interact both within one sector and across various sectors.

It became difficult to conduct research: carrying out fieldwork became problematic; access to many respondent groups for interviews and surveys deteriorated (and in some cases was completely closed), the level of fear among respondents increased, etc. In general, communication with stakeholders in Belarus has become problematic, the level of wariness and fear has increased, even including the fear of attending online events, contacting certain people, reading media and Telegram channels recognized as extremist by authorities, containing comments and opinions of experts, etc.

While organizations' problems may vary in nature, there is one common problem: unsustainable functioning. When describing this problem, respondents explained that *"you have to live from project to project, that is, by accumulating these research projects, which does not generally allow you to retain a sufficiently stable, permanent, and diverse pool of researchers who could focus on some topics"*. This results in staffing problems, management difficulties, and financial disruptions.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the period of the initial shock deriving from the closure of organizations and their relocation has passed, and now think tanks are actively developing new work schemes. They are engaging in planning and fundraising as well as mastering the work of their teams, which are distributed across different countries and time zones. At the same time, representatives of some think tanks describe their organizational potential as "sagging" while others believe it's "growing".

Functions: Old (before 2020) and New. What is Society Looking Forward to?

It is generally assumed that think tanks' main function is to generate new knowledge (mostly academic or politically-oriented, for decision-making purposes). According to respondents, the sector generally did manage to implement this function. Before 2020, think tanks focused on a variety of stakeholders: government agencies, professionals in a particular field, foreign experts and organizations, the media, CSOs, and society as a whole.

Respondents also noted varying degrees of rigor and different styles of presenting research, but one could say that organizations "found their niches" and worked successfully in them, sometimes responding to the existing agenda or sometimes forming and promoting new ideas and meanings. Besides this primary function, research centers often fulfilled other functions, including educational (schools, courses, open lectures, etc.); promotional ("explanatory" articles and media projects, blogs, podcasts, infographics, etc.); and advocacy (development of proposals and recommendations, advocacy campaigns, events aimed at cooperation between different sectors); as well as creation, development, and integration of the community (joint projects, International Congress of Belarusian Studies, Expert and Analytical Club, etc.).

The events of 2020-2021 forced think tanks to somewhat reconsider their functions. The research function, essentially, remained as the predominant one. At the same time, thematic priorities and the research agenda changed slightly: first, the COVID-19 pandemic and its various consequences became an important topic for some think tanks; second, as the political crisis unfolded, this topic also became dominant for many. The socio-political situation has increased the workload of both analyzing the situation and explaining it to the general public. The change in the research agenda is also prompted by the reorientation of the target groups/stakeholders. This is relevant, in the first place, for those think tanks that used to work most actively with state bodies. Many now have more "short", applied analytics, often at the expense of long fundamental research.

The functions of education and popularization as well as interaction with various international organizations were named among other important functions. Preservation of institutional and research "memory" in the context of political succession both in Belarus ("old-new" opposition), and abroad, in democratic countries (due to elections).

When estimating the expectations of the Belarusian society from independent think tanks, respondents agreed that they expect analytics; explanations; a realistic and objective view of current events; and, possibly, forecasts for the future and insights about how to reform certain spheres. It is important for society to know and see that there are organizations and institutions that can respond to such a request, but also specific "human beings" - analysts and researchers. However, this request is not clearly addressed to the analytical community and is not structured.

Answers to this question included: *"it [the society] wants simple solutions to complex problems"* and *"I am afraid that some part of the society is expecting from us some formula of how to change the power, and we cannot answer this question"*. This "thirst" for formulas and simple solutions among the society is probably also amplified by the fact that the Belarusian authorities do not offer a positive image, strategy, and vision of the future.

Changes in Think Tanks' Relationships with Stakeholders

a. Interaction with the state

Think tanks' interaction with state bodies and agencies has "sagged" like nothing else. Yet even before 2020, many centers did not have it on a permanent and systematic basis. Those that cooperated closely with the state lost these engagements completely or almost completely. Those organizations that had government agencies and officials among their main target groups had to reconsider their vision and orientation with regard to whom they primarily work for. At the same time, limited interaction continued in terms of the transfer of information through indirect channels (international organizations, mass media, or the use of research and materials by officials). Besides, some officials and representatives of the academic sphere continue to cooperate with Belarusian think tanks and participate in the drafting of various materials under pen names.

Another distinctive development was the enrichment of the analytical community by experts who left the civil service and started to participate in research projects of non-governmental think tanks (Pavel Sliunkin, Pavel Matsukevich, Henadz Korshunau) or to participate in discussion formats (Anatoli Kotau, Artsiom Praskalovich, Natallia Zadzarkouskaya). This boosted think tanks' activities, not only enhancing their human resources potential, but also enriching their expertise with personal experiences of professionals from the governmental apparatus.

b. Interaction with the media

Respondents' answers demonstrate diverse assessments of the dynamics of interaction between think tanks and the media: from a decrease to an increase (however, the majority of respondents still reported an increase in media attention). Nevertheless, all were affected by the curtailment of the media field itself in Belarus, repressions against journalists, and relocation of some editorial offices abroad. On the part of the expert community, there are fewer people commenting on various processes and events, while the demand for information from the politicized society has increased. Cooperation with the state media has decreased to zero.

c. Interaction with business

Only a handful of think tanks, mostly those engaged in economic research, had such interaction before 2020. However, business has an interest in research, and not just in current analysis and narrow economic topics, but also in broader issues, like reforms, etc. Respondents indicated that *"they [business] are not only interested in what the exchange rate will be in a week or six months and what to base their financial forecast on, but they are also interested in some overall trends in the country's development: 'Do you think that maybe we need mass privatization?'"* Certainly, such communication would be more productive if there were face-to-face meetings, since the online format imposes its own limitations. The fear factor also limits the interaction: business representatives often do not want to engage in open communication with think tanks.

d. Interaction with civil society organizations (CSOs)

Few of the surveyed think tanks were involved in systematic cooperation with CSOs. At the same time, CSOs themselves occasionally conduct independent research. The quality of such research varies. During the height of the political crisis in 2020, this type of interaction intensified, primarily through the participation of experts as lecturers and consultants in various activities and initiatives, but then seems to have returned to its usual, relatively low level.

e. Interaction with new initiatives and activists, "courtyard" communities, etc.

This type of interaction emerged in the wake of these new initiatives themselves. In the fall of 2020, some think tanks were actively engaging with these initiatives, organizing

educational events for them, or providing consulting services. Some respondents were personally involved in these initiatives as residents of a particular geographic area. However, as the repression of such initiatives increased and their activity faded, cooperation also declined.

- f. Interaction with other political actors (election candidates' headquarters, initiative groups, etc.)

As a rule, think tanks, striving to maintain their independent status, do not engage in systematic cooperation/consulting with any political force on an institutional basis. Research results and individual projects that are of interest to political actors (e.g., the Bank of Ideas) are presented to all democratic forces. However, individual analysts/experts have acted or are acting as consultants to certain political forces or leaders, which is regarded as their personal initiative and responsibility.

- g. Interaction with other think tanks

Following the creation of the Belarusian Association of Research Centers in the fall of 2020, the interaction between organizations within the sector itself has somewhat revived ("*willingness to interact more has emerged*"). Although there are other opinions that are based on the fact that interaction has now decreased due to organizations and experts being located in different countries and cities. Importantly, the very creation of the Association "ripened" and was initiated "from the bottom up" by the organizations themselves ("*we sail in the same boat*"). One of the first projects made possible thanks to communication within the Association was the Bank of Ideas. Plans for preparing reform proposals within the framework of the Belarus Beehive project were also presented. A fair amount of interaction takes place on a personal level between experts; sometimes the interaction involves participation in each other's projects and studies.

- h. Interaction with international organizations

According to some respondents, there is a growing interest in the Belarusian issue among international stakeholders. However, others do not notice such a trend. Obviously, this type of interaction also depends on a center's agenda.

Key Problems of Sector's Organizations

Among the problems faced by Belarusian think tanks, one can distinguish a separate group of those that have an external character. These problems are similar to those faced by other CSOs. As a distinctive feature, physical access to target groups is not an immediate necessity for think tanks. Generally speaking, such problems may include:

- An overall political crisis, during which recommendations of independent experts are not taken into account;
- Uncertainty and repression of many organizations and experts who cannot enter the country without the risk of being persecuted;

- A need to deal with the dissolution of legal entities in Belarus (often remotely);
- Partially closed borders of Belarus, which make it difficult for experts to travel;
- Concealing official statistical data on important indicators, both economic and social (e.g., mortality);
- Conducting most events in an online format, which does not provide opportunities for informal communication with colleagues and other stakeholders;
- Facing difficulties or even being unable to conduct field research: sociological surveys, face-to-face focus groups in Belarus.

Respondents named the following problems that could be described as internal, related to the sector itself:

- Shortage of qualified research professionals, both in Belarus and abroad (especially in some narrow areas), and sometimes poorly developed culture of cooperation among experts in the sector;
- A need to redefine mission, vision and development strategy (for some organizations) complicated by the fact that it is difficult to predict for how long it will be necessary to operate while being completely or partially relocated as well as by the general uncertainty in the country;
- A need to restructure various organizational processes: legal registration and payment of taxes in another country or several countries, management of distributed personnel, etc.;
- Lack of institutional support for think tanks, which makes long-term planning and strategic development challenging; because of this, management spends a lot of time and effort to ensure the continuity of funding through short- and medium-term projects;
- Difficulties with attracting and retaining professional research staff due to security issues (in Belarus) and financial capabilities. Meanwhile, there is an outflow of personnel to safer and more financially attractive sectors (mainly IT), which should be considered by the sector's organizations;
- Difficulties with building a team when working remotely, as well as with integrating new people into a geographically distributed team;
- - The think tanks that have some staff in Minsk face a conflict between the safety of people in Minsk and publicity, the promotion of their research results.

Think tanks deal with these challenges to the best of their abilities and to the extent they have the human resources to manage, fundraise, develop projects, draft research proposals, etc.

What Kind of Support Sector Needs

When talking about donor support, respondents focused primarily on the availability of institutional and/or long-term projects (three years and preferably longer), since the very specifics of scientific and research activities imply long planning horizons. It is important to be able to preserve and develop human potential and expertise – both individually for individual organizations and for the sector as a whole (*"if only we could all get together with a moderator*

or consultant who could help us in terms of results-based management, what goals we want to achieve, how we can achieve them in the current environment").

More sustained support, according to respondents, would enable think tanks to develop recommendations based on systematic and regular analysis, rather than as the result of a short-term burst of interest in Belarus or as part of a short-term project logic. It is important to maintain experts' communication and interaction with each other and with foreign colleagues, to keep the level of knowledge of experts themselves at the current, competitive level, to share experiences and best practices, as well as to develop joint projects. Think tanks also need legal assistance, as well as programs and projects aimed at dealing with burnout. During the interviews, it was also pointed out that it would be important for think tanks to understand the position of donors and their expectations towards them as well as the topics they are researching.

When assessing current practices of interaction with donors (drafting proposals, reports, etc.), the majority of respondents did not point to any major changes. In their opinion, a lot of time and effort is spent on research and project administration. One respondent noted that donors have become more loyal to think tanks, taking into account their current challenges and problems.

Proposed measures to support the sector include organizing short-term internships for researchers in well-established think tanks to improve their skills; supporting networking events between Belarusian and foreign think tanks; and discussing the research achievements and challenges of the sector at individual events – meetings or conferences.

KEY FINDINGS

The sector of independent think tanks was affected by the crackdown on civil society during the political crisis of 2020-2021 in Belarus. Currently, they operate in three formats: completely outside of Belarus, in a mixed format, and some of them continue to work inside Belarus.

Think tanks have generally been able to restructure their work and continue their research activities. While the political crisis has had an impact on research topics and especially on media commentary, it has not changed their overall thematic orientation. They continue to operate in their priority spheres, according to their agendas, although in changed conditions and facing new challenges of various kinds – administrative, political, staffing, etc. Other functions (educational, promotional, advocacy) are also performed, although to a much lesser extent than before. Despite the fact that think tanks continue their work, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about their future role.

Belarusian think tanks need access to long-term and institutional projects providing an opportunity to build up their own capacities. At the same time, in some cases, it is important for organizations to restore the "pre-crackdown " capacity and activity level. More steady support will enable think tanks to develop recommendations based on systematic and regular analysis and preserve institutional memory and research experience in the context of political succession both in Belarus ("old-new" opposition) and in democratic countries.

The sector also needs symbolic support from partners – CSOs, the media, and the society as a whole – to better understand its role in various public and political processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Belarusian democratic political leaders and politicians:

- To articulate in their public agenda the importance of independent research for Belarus and their own political activities;
- To initiate and promote projects/programs for Belarusian think tanks and researchers as a separate area of support for the Belarusian civil society.

To donors and international organizations:

- To distinguish the sector of research organizations as a separate domain requiring project support, as it is currently supported mainly as part of Belarus's civil society;
- Propose and implement long-term institutional support projects for the think tank sector, including infrastructure support; professional development opportunities for researchers and managers, including internships at foreign think tanks; academic development and promotion; networking; advocacy; etc.;
- To support projects aimed at interaction and networking between Belarusian and foreign think tanks. In particular, aimed at interaction with research organizations of the countries where Belarusian think tanks are located or to which they relocated;
- -To approach Belarusian think tanks to obtain data and research results for making evidence-based decisions concerning Belarus;
- To initiate a regular closed discussion platform format involving diplomats, representatives of international organizations, and Belarusian think tanks to exchange opinions and information on relevant social and political issues;
- -To maintain an open dialogue with think tanks about their role, expectations from them, and the prospects for both their support and interaction with them under different future scenarios.

To think tanks:

- -To coordinate and publicly promote a coherent vision of the sector's needs and expectations from other stakeholders;
- -To seek innovative ways for communicating with stakeholders located in Belarus, as well as for conducting research under current constraints;
- To develop cooperation with other CSOs, as well as political, diaspora, and business structures;
- To build up joint research and communication projects to strengthen interaction within the sector and share expertise in their respective fields;
- To continue publicizing their research results in the Belarusian and foreign media.

To Belarusian CSOs and media:

- To publicly support the sector as necessary and important for Belarus's present and future and seek opportunities for cooperation;
- To identify research centers as a separate actor in need of donor support;
- To use existing research as an evidence base for advocacy campaigns and educational projects. Act as a client for new research. This way, CSO activities will be supported by systematic analysis, and think tanks' research will be more accessible to the public;
- To use contacts with think tanks to jointly expose disinformation and propaganda, either by expert commentary or by initiating joint projects.