

Eastern partnership and Lithuania: Challenges for NGOs, solutions and opportunities. Case study: Belarus

Report

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Summary

By analysing the partnership between Lithuania and Belarus, this report aims to highlight the special characteristics of Belarusian civil society and its NGO activities.

The objectives of this report are: (1) to discuss the features of Belarusian civil society; (2) to identify the characteristics of Belarusian NGO activities in relation to the applied measures that limit the scope of activities as well as the tendency for NGO reduction; (3) to discuss Lithuania's support for Belarusian civil society and CSOs; (4) to review the situation of Belarusian NGOs in the Republic of Lithuania, challenges and solutions.

This report discusses the Eastern Partnership as a special Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy; this dimension, although positive in general, nevertheless has limited opportunities. For instance, partner countries until today are being divided into "advanced" and "less advanced", while the situation in Belarus has escalated even more since the start of the project. This report analyses changes in Belarusian civil society over the last decade. Lastly, taking into account the difficult NGO environment in Belarus, Lithuania's initiatives and measures are presented, which have been taken in order to support the Belarusian civil society. This report shows that despite a favourable legal environment in Lithuania, loopholes are still present, while Lithuania's strategy with respect to the third sector with its international aspect, continues to be undefined.

This report looks at the period before 2021. However it is important to note that the political situation of the state in question is highly unstable, therefore the data that this report is based on may change swiftly.

Conclusions

1. Civil society in Belarus is not strong and faces numerous challenges. Civil society development is mainly limited by state institutions which form an unfavourable legal environment, persecute and punish CSO leaders, create obstacles for establishing CSOs, for them to gather, etc. The Government of Belarus maintains that CSOs are a threat due to their criticising the Government's decisions and actively encouraging democracy. Although NGO advocacy in Belarus increased by 0.9 from 2009 to 2019 (CSO Sustainability Index), their influence on state institution decisions remains small, while activist efforts to engage are being stifled. This leads to the belief that challenges faced by Belarusian civil society will not disappear any time soon.
2. In Lithuania, Belarusian civil society is being strengthened using various measures: financial support for Belarusians and their organisations; permission to arrive and reside in Lithuania under simplified conditions; providing opportunities to transfer and successfully develop their activities in Lithuania; helping the youth to aim for higher education; and providing assistance to the victims of repressions and pressure in their own country.
3. Although NGO legal environment in Lithuania is perceived as positive, and both the benefits and the assistance provided seem to be sufficient, Belarusian NGOs are still facing various challenges, among them: lack of financial accounting skills and opportunities to use public administrative services remotely; insufficient financing; language barrier and related difficulties to understand the local legal system and order.
4. Lithuanian Government institutions – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs first and foremost – should prepare a clear action plan related to Belarusian NGOs which would include: defining the direction and the scope for actions taken by competent institutions; gathering and systematising the required information as well as adapting it to strengthen Belarusian NGOs in Lithuania; establishing a Council for Belarusian NGO issues made up of inter-institutional and/or Lithuanian NGO representatives.

