



On the socio-political situation in Belarus against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic

The development of the epidemiological situation and the state of the health system

BNP EaP CSF evaluates [the statistics presented publicly](#) as inconsistent, incomplete, and, in some cases, doubtful. Official data on morbidity and mortality among medical staff are not reported publicly. Public authorities are creating obstacles to the work of independent media, including restrictions on obtaining official information, accusations of escalating panic, prosecution, and arrests of independent journalists.

There are cases of dismissals and arrests of health workers for public statements and interviews with independent media. In terms of the growth rate of the total number of the infected, Belarus is ahead of all the countries of the Eastern Partnership, while the number of deaths remains low (within 1%). There is strong reason to believe that mortality statistics are artificially low.

Civil society organizations

The BNP EaP CSF notes a good and fast self-organized civil society in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has appeared a large number of volunteer initiatives that support healthcare providers and vulnerable groups. At the same time, we draw attention to the development of a number of legislative processes in Belarus that may adversely affect the activities of such groups and CSOs:

1. The development of the draft Law "On Volunteer Activities" is continuing. The BNP EaP CSF Coordination Committee [urged](#) the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Justice to postpone the development of this draft because of the impossibility to involve all interested parties in its discussion at the moment. The National Youth Council RADA BNP EaP CSF membership organization [appealed](#) to the Prosecutor General.
2. Membership organizations of the BNP EaP CSF [are concerned](#) about the possible tightening of legislation and practice regarding the receipt of foreign non-reimbursable assistance.
3. A draft law has been developed [to amend](#) the Law on Public Associations, which also contains potential adverse consequences for CSOs.

The membership organizations of the BNP EaP CSF ([NYC "RADA"](#), [human rights organizations](#)) are concerned about the serious repression against civil society that began in May 2020. From May 6 to May 13, over 120 people were arbitrarily detained and sentenced to fines and arrests for participation in peaceful assemblies.

The Congress of Independent Trade Unions membership organization [called on](#) the government to change its social and labor policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Environmental protection and climate change

BNP EaP CSF is [especially concerned](#) about the launch of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant scheduled for July 2020. Environmental organizations included in the BNP EaP CSF see [a threat in the probability of lowering environmental requirements](#) in connection with the project of the Presidential Decree. It involves creation of an out-of-court procedure for exemption from liability for environmental damage. The "Ecodom" membership organization [considers it unacceptable](#) to adopt the Decision of the Council of Ministers "On the standards for permissible emissions and disposal of radioactive substances into the environment" without public discussion.

Business and Economics

The economy of Belarus is experiencing a crisis. According to various estimates, the fall in GDP may reach 6% or more. Affected sectors from the epidemic are retail, catering, tourism, creative industries, sports, entertainment and recreation. BNP EaP CSF believes that the government is taking belated, piecemeal and inconsistent measures to support national business. Only on April 24, the president signed a decree "On supporting the economy," providing for measures to support enterprises in certain sectors. Membership organizations of the BNP EaP CSF took this decree critically and evaluated its measures as ineffective. Business alliances that are part of the BNP EaP CSF advocate more specific support measures related to lower rental rates, tax breaks and tax deferrals, optimization of electricity payments, cancellation of unscheduled inspections, etc.

Government policies to contain the spread of the infection

The BNP EaP CSF draws attention to the fact that Belarus does not comply with [the recommendations formulated by the WHO mission](#) on April 21 following the visit to the country. Unlike all the countries of the Eastern Partnership, Belarus did not introduce quarantine measures and mandatory measures of social distance. All government agencies, enterprises (including cafes and restaurants), public transport, schools and kindergartens can officially work as usual. International borders remain open. Mass events, except events with the participation of foreigners, are not restricted at the national level. On May 9, a military parade was held in Belarus to participate in which workers of state enterprises and institutions, as well as students, were massively forced.

Public authorities also failed to respond to [the open letter](#) of the Coordination Committee of the BNP EaP CSF regarding the spread of COVID-19.

Education

Educational institutions continue to work in Belarus. No consistent measures of social distance have been introduced in the education system. Schools are attended by no more than 30% of students, the rest do not receive the opportunities of normal distance education, since this is not provided for by the Education Code. There are cases of political persecution and expulsion of students who called for the introduction of quarantine in their educational institutions.





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Conclusions of the BNP EaP CSF

1. Government policies to limit the spread of the virus appear extremely inadequate. Belarus does not implement WHO recommendations.
2. Government measures to support business and the economy are inadequate to the current situation.
3. The actions of the healthcare system are adequate to the current situation, however, there is a probability of a collapse of the healthcare system with the continued exponential increase in the morbidity.
4. In conditions when civil society has self-organized and has actually taken over part of the functions of the government, there is an intensification of repressive mechanisms. Draft laws regarding civil society are developed without real consideration for the views of CSOs.

Suggestions and recommendations of the BNP EaP CSF

In this situation, we recommend following the principle of conditional support: no support can be obtained if the following basic conditions are not met.

1. The government first takes a package of measures to respond to the situation in the relevant field.
2. Measures are developed and implemented in regular dialogue with independent structures of the Belarusian society.
3. The implementation and management of support projects is carried out with the participation of independent civil society organizations.
4. The support provided should be consistent with the EU policy priorities in the Eastern Partnership region for the period after 2020 and provide conditions for solving not only short-term tasks, but also creating long-term resilience to global and regional challenges.
5. Information on the support of government structures from the EU and on the progress of their projects should be open and accessible to the public.
6. The condition for the allocation of support from the EU should be the creation of favorable conditions for CSOs, including the attraction of foreign non-reimbursable assistance, without which it is impossible to effectively and fully participate in the processes of discussion and implementation of projects.

It is also advisable to apply these conditions when implementing projects through international organizations and financial institutions (UN, UNDP, WHO, World Bank, etc.). Practice has shown that without independent organizations in the Committees of large projects implemented by international organizations in cooperation with government bodies, their results are more likely to be colorable and not leading to real changes.

If these requirements are not met, support should not be directed to the government budget or local budgets, but should be realized through civil society or private sector structures.

