

FIELD OF INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE 2024: ACTORS, CHALLENGES, FUTURE

BASELINE RESEARCH RESULTS



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INTRODUCTION

This is an abridged version of research paper that presents a comprehensive examination of the principal organizations and key figures within Belarusian culture, both domestically and internationally, alongside the contextual conditions influencing their existence as of late 2024. The collaboration for this study involves the Belarusian Council for Culture and the Danish Cultural Institute. The impetus for investigating the prevailing conditions surrounding Belarusian culture arose from the conclusion of the EU-funded program “ArtPower Belarus: Safeguarding the Belarusian Civic Space Through Culture and Arts”. Subsequent research conducted with similar objectives following the inception of the program can be found [here](#).

Purposes of work

Description of the field of organizations and initiatives whose activities are aimed at the development and promotion of Belarusian culture, analysis of problems and prospects for community development, as well as assessment of changes and dynamics in the Belarusian cultural field over the past year, starting from the second half of 2023 (when the previous research was conducted).

Such an assessment is necessary primarily for entities that claim to solve problems in the field of development of the Belarusian cultural sphere, including the development of strategies, programmes and specific projects for the development of the cultural field, adequate to the needs of cultural figures. In addition, such analytics are useful for cultural actors themselves, especially those who seek to develop, facilitate and lobby the interests of Belarusian culture through their activities. Understanding an adequate picture of the state of Belarusian independent culture can contribute to a more correct choice of priorities, strategies and tactics for its development, and promote dialogue and partnership.

We also believe that expanding knowledge about Belarusian culture, increasing the number of studies, and comprehensive analytics of this complex object will contribute to the development and coordination of common strategic positions between various actors of Belarusian civil

society to overcome crisis phenomena and put cooperation in the field on a positive track.

Empirical basis

- Results of open source monitoring;
- Results of online survey (50 questionnaires);
- Results of expert survey (16 interviews).

Research deadline: autumn 2024.

Note: For security considerations, we are disseminating an abridged version of the full research text. The identities of certain cultural organizations and initiatives operating within this domain have been withheld in accordance with agreements made with their representatives.

THE FIELD OF INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE: MAIN FEATURES

Last year, during the initial baseline research, we managed to find information in open sources about **170 independent organizations and initiatives** operating in the field of Belarusian culture. This year, we managed to find information about a total of **266¹ organizations**. This number is far from 100% coverage of all initiatives and organizations, one way or another related to Belarusian culture. Our field of attention included actors of various organizational forms and types: public organizations, commercial and non-commercial institutions, creative collectives and informal initiatives, foundations and associations.

While we cannot accurately assess the quantitative volume and dynamics of the cultural sector, we can nevertheless formulate a number of trends:

1. **a gradual decrease in the number of legal liquidations of public organizations** that were related to cultural activities within Belarus. Since the second half of 2021, the country's authorities have begun systematically deregistering civil society organizations. According to human rights activists, by mid-2023, about 220 organizations had been liquidated in this way; this figure has increased by 19 organizations [in the past year](#). We have a "purged" field and a situation close to the exhaustion of this method of institutional pressure. These same circumstances in the future may contribute to the gradual saturation of the legal cultural field with new figures within the country. Among the new initiatives and organizations that have entered our database this year, there are many actors operating within Belarus. However, as a rule, these are no longer public institutions, but commercial and semi-commercial or completely volunteer online projects (blogs, podcasts, micromedia, etc.). There are also cases of registration of new independent cultural institutions.
2. **the emergence of new cultural institutions and initiatives outside Belarus**. The cultural field in various countries continues to be replenished with new Belarusian participants. It is important to note the generally positive dynamics in the formal and quantitative dimension: the number of initiatives that have officially ceased to exist is significantly lower than

¹Of this number, at least 21 organizations appeared in the second half of 2023-2024.

those that have appeared over the past year. However, many initiatives are “on pause”, barely carrying out any activities or only occasionally implementing cultural activities. Often, the emergence of new initiatives in emigration is not evidence of the emergence of new subjects, but rather a “regrouping” (usually episodic) of representatives of existing initiatives around more promising forms of organizations, while their main structures are in a state of crisis. An example is the sphere of Belarusian theatre abroad, which has been replenished with new projects and initiatives, despite the fact that many theatre groups that appeared earlier nominally exist, but do not have the opportunity for noticeable activity.

New organizations, foundations, public associations, cafes and bars with a “cultural” component, commercial and semi-commercial cultural offerings are emerging. This is especially visible within Belarus, where experts see a noticeable rise in cultural production. But the basic assumptions of state policy regarding the independent cultural field have remained unchanged, so this rise (“of flowers sprouting through the asphalt”) is unstable. In addition, the state of the entire independent cultural sphere within the country has deteriorated so much since 2020 that the assessment of this “rise” of the last year and a half may be more related to the “low base effect.”

Analyzing the nature of this phenomenon, we can say that within the country there is a growth and development of media projects, podcasts, etc., up to the release of clothing and merchandise related to traditional culture, heritage and the Belarusian language. The music industry in Belarus is also developing quite dynamically: over the past year, many new youth bands of various genres have appeared, many of which have chosen to create in the Belarusian language, and modern technologies and social media help them find their listener without much expense.

In emigration, the general situation is often defined by experts as stagnation: the number of mass cultural events and the production of cultural products compared to 2020-2021 has decreased, and the interest of Belarusian diasporas in cultural events has also become moderate. The worst situation is in the film and theatre spheres, the best is in book publishing. But the very fact of maintaining the status quo of the Belarusian cultural sphere in emigration cannot be ignored as positive.

ACTORS OF INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE: STRUCTURE AND CLASSIFICATIONS

During the research, we dealt with the following **types of subjects/actors**:

- civil society organizations working with Belarusian culture in Belarus and abroad, of any sustainable form (public associations, institutions, organizations, etc.), registered or which for one reason or another are not registered;
- informal (non-institutionalized) cultural initiatives;
- independent creative groups (theatre, music, etc.);
- commercial and non-commercial structures and venues that provide the infrastructure components of the cultural process (publishing houses, exhibition centres, festivals, schools or other educational venues, research and media structures);
- individual participants in the cultural process - writers, artists, musicians, designers, photographers, actors, translators, journalists, teachers, researchers, managers, producers, etc.

Our research focus was primarily on various types of cultural “organizations”, that is, on the first four types of subjects presented in the classification above.

Among the actors of such types, several main clusters can be distinguished:

- local initiatives of the Belarusian diaspora (have a cultural component in their activities, organize concerts, parties, master classes, and hold traditional holidays);
- public organizations or initiatives that have a cultural dimension as one of their areas of activity;
- organizations for which cultural activities are the main focus.

For the purposes of the research, among Belarusian organizations and initiatives for which the cultural direction of activity is basic (the third cluster), we distinguish **two blocks of cultural subjects/actors**:

1. Block “Thematic cultural activities”;
2. Block “Development of the cultural field”.

The first block is represented by entities whose main activity is aimed at providing cultural services or producing **a cultural product** (publishing books, producing cultural online content, etc.) or performing a specific **type of action** (protecting historical monuments and cultural landscapes, etc.).

We have combined all organizations whose main activity is aimed at developing and creating favourable conditions for cultural activities into **the second block** - “development of the cultural field”. This includes both individual initiatives and network and coalition associations (partnerships of organizations, consortia, platforms, etc.). A separate element of this group are hubs and spaces, which represent the infrastructure for various initiatives, as well as online platforms that perform a similar function.

To date, we can record the following configuration of subjects of the “development of the cultural field” block:

- **service organizations and facilitators** – individual institutions, network or coalition associations of organizations that seek to improve the infrastructural conditions for the activities of cultural organizations, provide them with services and assistance in organizational development, management, and resource mobilization;
- **thematic (sectoral) network and coalition associations** (partnerships of organizations, consortia, platforms, etc.) - associations of civil society organizations and initiatives in individual areas or topics of activity (theatre, cinema, etc.). Their goal is to strengthen the potential and expand institutional capabilities, exchange experience, provide expert and educational support and attract resources for member organizations, as well as cooperate in efforts to implement joint projects;

- **foundations and fundraising platforms** regularly raise funds to support Belarusian cultural figures and initiatives;
- **hubs and spaces** are elements of the “physical” infrastructure of the cultural community outside and (less often) within Belarus. Today, in Lithuania, Poland, Georgia, and Germany, there are dozens of spaces that provide areas and logistical infrastructure for Belarusian initiatives and projects in the cultural sphere, cultivate a community of creators around them, and support and develop grassroots creative initiatives;
- **digital infrastructure** – tools and platforms for implementing cultural projects and initiatives, as well as organizations that provide IT services on a volunteer basis for creators and collectives.

The vast majority of the organizations we identified are institutional in nature, however, most likely, in reality, informal initiatives, one way or another related to Belarusian culture, are quantitatively more numerous than those that fell into our research focus.

Among the most obvious and, according to many experts, fundamental dividing lines in the Belarusian cultural sphere is the division between actors who remain and continue to operate in Belarus and those who engage in Belarusian culture outside their native country.

The geography of organizations operating outside Belarus is quite extensive. The largest concentrations of Belarusian cultural figures can be found in Poland and Lithuania² (these countries are the main recipients of Belarusian refugees and “relocants”). Among the countries of the “far abroad”, as those where the Belarusian cultural presence is visible, one can single out the Czech Republic, Germany, and the USA.

²Georgia was previously on this list, but due to changes in the country’s political climate, many cultural actors, along with other representatives of Belarusian civil society, are forced to move to other countries.

Another criterion by which cultural actors can be classified is their audience orientation. Three types of audiences can be distinguished. These are:

1. local diaspora communities or people who have recently left Belarus;
2. Belarusians in Belarus;
3. foreign audiences.

Most often, one can see a diverse combination of these orientations. Especially recently, when the interest of the Belarusian diaspora in

participating in local Belarusian cultural life has become lower. It should be noted here that often those Belarusian organizations that are primarily oriented towards foreign consumers also involve foreign cultural figures and institutions in the production of their cultural products, which contributes to the expansion of cooperation and exchange.

CONNECTIONS AND INTERACTION OF CULTURAL ACTORS. NETWORKS, ASSOCIATIONS AND COALITIONS

If we compare the general situation in the cultural sphere as of today and a year ago (at the time of our previous study) in terms of the level of interaction between cultural actors, the density of ties, etc., then no particular changes are observed. As before, in the emigrant part of Belarusian culture, geographical disunity, an acute lack of time and resources for establishing interaction not related to the implementation of a specific project, a relatively low level of project interaction itself, and other problems prevent the formation of the desired density of ties. As before, one of the most common comments of experts on the issue of communication and cooperation is the phrase “everyone is on their own”.

The results of the online survey confirm the experts' opinions. Thus, to the question “**How satisfied are you with the current level of cooperation/interaction of your organization with other organizations in the field of culture?**” only 4 out of 50 organizations that participated in the survey answered that they were completely satisfied with this level, while half of the respondents (25 out of 50) were only partially satisfied and would like to increase the level of cooperation, and almost a quarter (12 out of 50) were completely dissatisfied with the state of cooperation and interaction. Less than a third of respondents (14 out of 50) interact with any network or umbrella organization in any way. Among **the problems** that prevent organizations from achieving the desired level of cooperation and interaction, the most frequently cited are **a lack of time and resources**

to establish interaction, a lack of information about other initiatives, and a lack of common platforms for discussing ideas, directions for development, and finding new partners.



Diagram 1. Problems and obstacles in the process of establishing cooperation between organizations and initiatives³

It should be noted that in the 2023 survey, the ranking of problems was slightly different: the second and third positions were occupied by problems in communication and coordination of interests, as well as security issues. The problems of lack of information and common platforms occupied 4-5 places in terms of relevance, although by a small margin. **But the main problem noted by cultural organizations in both 2023 and 2024 remains the lack of resources within the organizations themselves to address issues of establishing sustainable connections and cooperation with other actors in the cultural field.**

³ When answering the question, you could choose several options from the ones offered.

The characteristics of the number of partnerships and the nature of the entities with which cooperation is carried out, recorded in the 2023 and 2024 surveys, are quite similar. The average number of organizations with which the participants of the 2023 and 2024 surveys had systematic or episodic cooperation during the year was 4-5 organizations. The nature of the entities most often named by respondents also did not change: these are network or large organizations of a wide profile; organizations, institutions, groups and even individual creators working in the same field; foundations and support programmes; hubs and spaces; publishing houses and book festivals; “thought factories” (think tanks) and educational initiatives; thematic media resources.

The following organizations were most often mentioned as partners in this year’s survey:

- Belarusian Council for Culture
- Belarusian PEN
- Fundacja TUTAKA
- “House of Creators” in Warsaw
- Create Culture Group
- Free Belarus Center
- Publishing House “Januškievič”
- Free Belarus Museum

With a fairly stable picture of the level of interaction in the Belarusian cultural field, one cannot fail to note the emergence of new attitudes. The general situation in the cultural sphere over time began to acquire features of stability in terms of prospects, and these features – both negative and positive – began to be perceived by cultural actors as a certain status quo. We can speak of a more meaningful request for cooperation and a clearer idea of specific and realistic directions for applying joint efforts, as well as working schemes and forms in which such an application could be implemented. **Among these, among other things, were the creation of general PR strategies and ways to increase attention to the activities of Belarusian artists, managerial support, and issues of building working partnerships with local authorities and local (non-Belarusian) cultural organizations.**

The second observation concerns the nature of interaction in the direction of assisting repressed figures, human rights issues in the cultural sphere, advocacy of the interests of cultural topics, etc. Despite the fact that such tasks are solved outside the boundaries of stable platforms and systemic organizations, but rather “ad hoc”, various cultural actors quite quickly unite when an appropriate occasion arises to solve them. However, outside of such an operational response, the level of their interaction and communication may not be at the highest level. The same is true for project interaction - situational partnerships that arise naturally and disappear just as naturally are quite common.

⁴ [REDACTED], Belarusian Independent Film Academy

⁵ It was about the initiative group for the creation of the Belarusian Institute of Theatre.

⁶ It was about the initiative group to create the “Institute of National Memory”.

⁷ International Union of Belarusian Writers, the initiative group for the creation of the Institute of the Belarusian Book.

⁸ The founding conference was held in the autumn of 2023.

⁹ The founding conference was held in early 2023

¹⁰ The institute received official registration in July 2024 in Poland.

As for the situation inside Belarus, the data we managed to obtain also indicate cautiously positive changes: gradually moving away from all the shocks of recent years, cultural figures who have finally decided to stay and explore ways of public cultural activity inside Belarus are grouping together by interests, reviving “hangouts” and communities. But it is too early to talk about the results and specific contours of the restoration of ties – here we can record an intention rather than a real process.

If we talk about the gap between “those who left” and “those who stayed,” then, according to experts, it is still considered the most fundamental dividing line of the sector. But this year, experts are increasingly perceiving this state of affairs as “natural” and in a certain sense fatal. The situation seems insurmountable, and in the future the gap can only deepen. Nevertheless, contact between these two parts of Belarusian culture exists both at the level of simple human relations and friendship, and in terms of activity (implementation of joint creative projects, etc.).

In the period 2023-2024, we can observe a continuation of the trend towards the creation of various types of sectoral and thematic network structures, coalitions and associations. In the recent research, we detected the creation (or at least a declaration of intention to create) of six organizations in the fields of cinema⁴, theatre and choreography⁵, national heritage, history and traditional culture⁶, literature and publishing⁷.

Now we can note the continuation of the institutionalization of the Belarusian Institute of Theatre (BIT)⁸, the Institute of the Belarusian

Book⁹, and the legalization of the Belarusian Institute of Public History¹⁰. It is worth noting the emergence of two initiatives from Belarusian independent photographers. These are the creation of the Belarusian Independent Photographic Association in September 2023, as well as the reformatting of the activities of the [REDACTED] photography school, which at a new stage of its development seeks to be a platform for cultivating a community of Belarusian photographers around itself, facilitating the development processes of this community, etc.

Also, not so long ago, a community was created around the closed online community “Sietka” (an initiative of the Belarusian PEN).

Another new structure has emerged among Belarusian musicians – [REDACTED], which aims to represent Belarusian musicians abroad, be a public platform for communication and professional development, and facilitate a charitable touring music movement. The initiative is at the stage of conceptual and legal design and resource search.

Thus, the field of network and coalition structures in the cultural field has been expanded with at least **four** new initiatives. These institutions were created in addition to similar network and coalition structures that existed before¹¹.

Experts note that these structures often face the impossibility of implementing their declared goals and their activities are reduced to narrow information and media work or do not go beyond holding one or two founding conferences. The interest of cultural actors in participating in the work of such associations is quite low, and the only condition for its increase can be the ability of these structures to solve specific problems and attract resources.

At the moment, such structures as the Belarusian PEN are successfully standing out, which has managed to occupy an important and relevant niche (protection of cultural rights) and unite cultural actors around it, as well as the Belarusian Council for Culture - to date, in fact, the only Belarusian organization that, in the new conditions, has managed to increase its potential “from scratch” and become a resource base for the development of Belarusian independent culture.

¹¹ We are talking about organizations such as the Belarusian Council for Culture, Belarusian PEN, [REDACTED].

However, even relatively successful structures remain distrustful, and their agenda and goals are misunderstood by creators, especially given the lack of resources needed to address strategic objectives.

In addition, the politicization and extremist status of some large network and facilitation structures make open cooperation with them virtually impossible for cultural actors based in Belarus.

The activities of media network projects and platforms that are suitable for building cultural communities and facilitating them through the organization of direct communication with grantors and investors can be positively assessed. So far, we are talking about online communities, for example, *sektor* and [REDACTED], where the most relevant grant projects and programmes are selected and offered to participants.

It is also possible to note the spread of community-building practices: many cultural organizations highlight the building of a community around themselves as a separate task for their activities. This can be perceived as one of the tactics of adaptation to current conditions and an attempt to find internal potential for self-development.

TRENDS AND TENDENCIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT BELARUSIAN CULTURE (2023-2024)

After analyzing the information obtained during interviews with experts, as well as comparing it with the results of an online survey, we were able to identify the following general trends in the cultural sphere:

- 1. Erosion of the creative potential of political topics.** In the wake of the political events of 2020, solidarity and cultural protest became the main motives for Belarusian independent cultural actors. But already in 2023, there was a gradual restoration of “apolitical” cultural production and a shift away from “traumatic” topics. Today, there are opinions about the exhaustion of this topic, the decline in interest in it among Belarusian and foreign audiences, the need to get out of the “trajectory of victimhood”

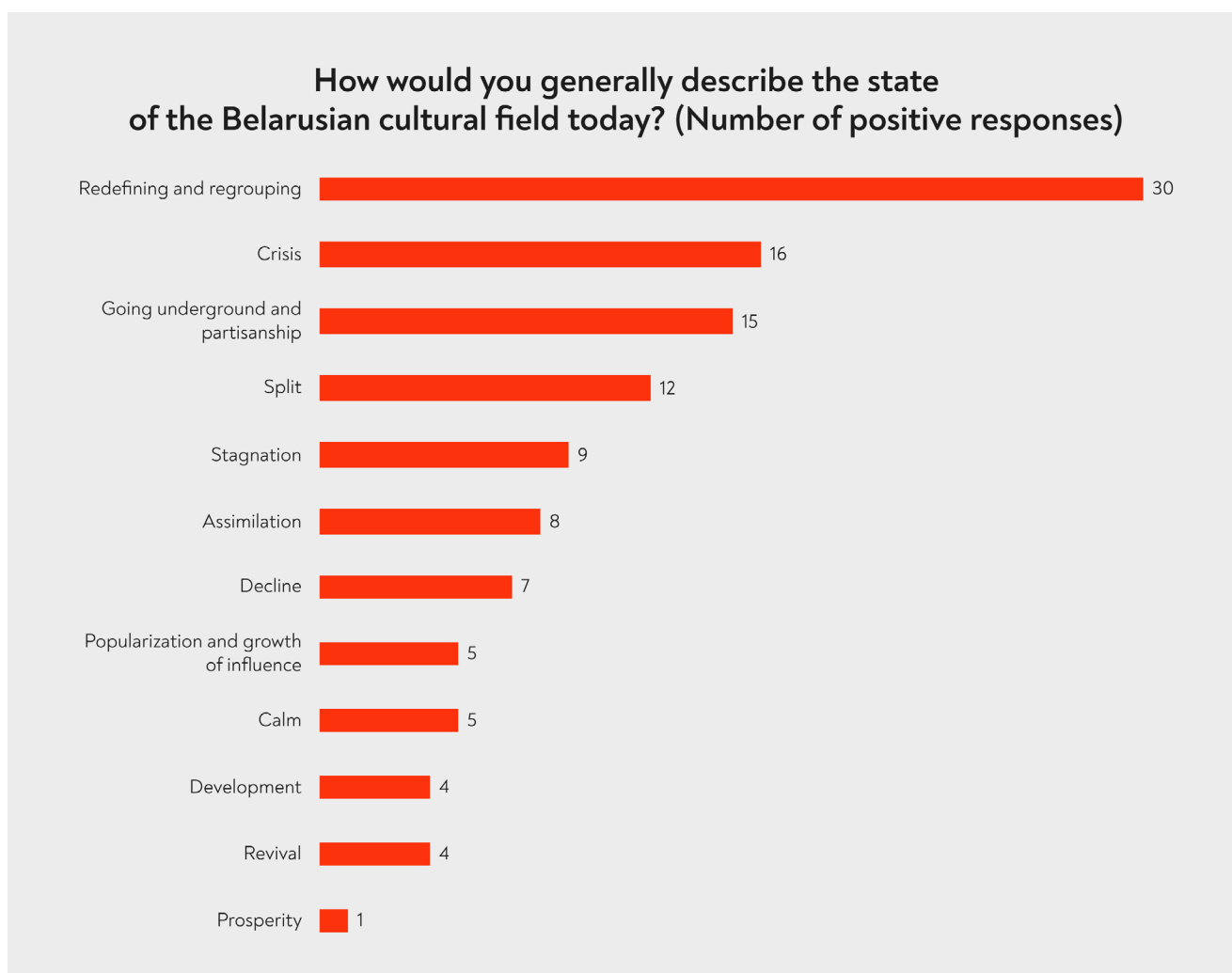
and find a new plot and ideological basis for creativity. The topic of repression and solidarity remains important, but we are talking about a formed and rather limited circle of creators and their audiences (“protest core”), which in this situation no longer represents the mainstream.

2. **“Slumping” of the cultural cycle at the stage of creation.** Decline in authorial activity and creation of unique works of art. At the same time, other stages of the cultural cycle (production/publishing, distribution) in various cultural fields can demonstrate much more positive dynamics. This situation is partly due to the ideological vacuum that has appeared against the background of the exhaustion of political topics.
3. **The crisis of the idea of sectoral “institutions” (networks and coalitions, associations, sectoral facilitators).** During 2023, new initiatives were actively formed, seeking to gather cultural actors around themselves in order to jointly seek opportunities for development. A certain inertia of this process could be observed in 2024, but it is worth noting the disappointment of many cultural figures, since the goals and plans declared by such structures did not correspond to their real capabilities. However, a number of initiatives seek to implement the facilitation function and create a circle of interested participants, at least by collecting information about competitions, grant programmes, etc.
4. **Reorientation towards the foreign (local) consumer.** This trend, which we detected in the previous research, has deepened and become relevant for a wide range of cultural actors in emigration. This direction is defined as the basic development strategy for the near future even by organizations that are ideologically tied to a specifically Belarusian context. With the departure from focusing on the Belarusian audience as the main one, the perception of the boundaries of the Belarusian cultural field as such is also changing. Among the organizations that took part in the online survey in both 2023 and 2024, only slightly more than half (60%) note Belarus as the main territory to which their activities are directed – almost nothing changes here. However, the participants in the 2024 survey are much more likely to name cultural institutions of European countries, international foundations, etc. among the organizations with which they interact or consider influential.
5. **“Professionalization” and the development of new opportunities against the backdrop of a gradual reduction in financial assistance**

directed to Belarusian civil society. Within Belarus, starting in 2020–2021, the legal opportunity to use foreign grant aid was completely blocked and this driver of the development of an independent cultural field lost its relevance. Culture in exile could still benefit from the “inertia” of the solidarity of the international community for some time. However, now actors abroad have come to realize the exhaustion of such a model. Initiatives have begun to pay more attention to international grant projects, residency programmes and other initiatives not specifically aimed at Belarusians. Public cultural organizations are also thinking about providing commercial services. Crowdfunding tools are an important support, although not very capacious. Entering local or European cultural markets requires a different level of preparation, so initiatives are actively improving the quality of management. In Belarus, the shortage of resources for development is solved mainly by combining creative activities “for the soul and people” with a commercial component (a venue for concerts, exhibitions, + a cafe, bar, shop, etc.).

- 6. Revival of cultural activity within Belarus.** Despite the continuing negative consequences of the 2020 political crisis, over the past year there has been a revival of cultural life within Belarus, including public independent cultural production and activity, to which the Belarusian audience is responding enthusiastically. The music sector is developing particularly rapidly. Two circumstances can be emphasized here: firstly, a new generation of young people has grown up, whose representatives were teenagers during the events of 2020 and did not participate in the protests; secondly, those artists who consciously and finally made the decision to stay in Belarus are gradually finding opportunities for activity in the new circumstances.

How do you assess the state of the Belarusian cultural field in general? The most “popular” qualification of the situation, chosen by almost two-thirds of respondents (30 out of 50), is “redefinition and regrouping”. About a third of those surveyed mention the words “crisis” and “going underground”. The complexity of a “general”, holistic assessment of the state of the Belarusian cultural field was also revealed during the survey - some respondents chose opposite characteristics, leaving comments that Belarusian culture on different sides of the border is developing asynchronously.



¹² When answering the question, you could choose several options from the ones offered.

Diagram 2. Assessment of the state of the Belarusian field during an online survey¹²

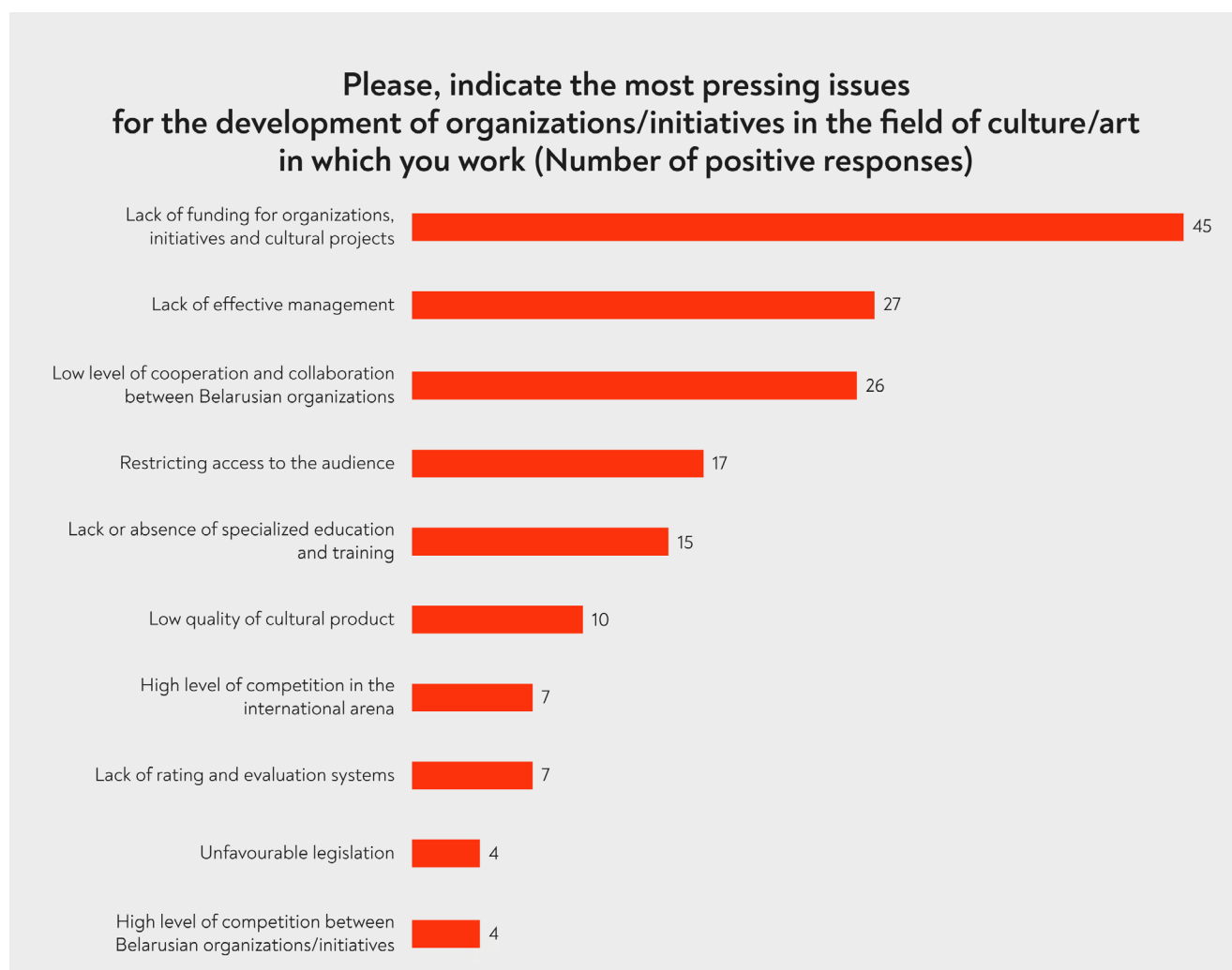
CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Among the problems and challenges that most strongly affected the state of the Belarusian cultural field in 2023–2024, according to expert interviews, the following can be noted:

- 1. Negative consequences of the 2020 political crisis.** Practices of censorship and forced self-censorship, repression (from bans on the profession to criminal prosecution). The cultural renaissance within the country, which some experts speak of, is taking place against the backdrop of the implementation of a state cultural policy that has not changed the basic principles of bringing the cultural sphere to complete control and “ideological purity.”
- 2. Decline in interest in the activities of Belarusian cultural actors.** We see several reasons for this. Firstly, it is the fading of the 2020 effect and the “depoliticization” of the Belarusian diaspora. Secondly, it is assimilation processes within diasporas: people are settling abroad, learning languages and starting to use the local (non-Belarusian) cultural infrastructure. This applies to both consumers and the artists themselves.
- 3. Insufficient “visibility” of Belarusian culture abroad.** Belarusian cultural figures increasingly feel the lack of broad positioning, PR, advertising, production, etc. Eliminating this deficiency, according to experts, will allow expanding the audience at the expense of politically uninvolved Belarusians and the European public.
- 4. Lack of managerial competencies,** which, combined with the above-mentioned problem, prevents broader and more profitable positioning in the market. Often, creators or collectives who have something to offer consumers do not have basic competencies in working with a personal brand, positioning, writing grant applications, etc.
- 5. Lack of resources for development.** Every year, there are fewer and fewer grant programmes and projects aimed at supporting Belarusian creators. During an online survey, more than half of the participants (26 out of 50) noted that their organization is either in an “unstable state” or “on the verge of survival.” Reflecting on the prospects for the organization’s development or existence over the next three years, many respondents noted that the prospects depend on the ability to achieve financial sustainability. The reaction may be different: to move into other areas, to look for commercial development strategies, to reduce the number and volume of cultural production, etc. There are examples of successful commercial cultural

projects created by Belarusians both abroad and within Belarus, but even relatively successful commercially oriented cultural institutions periodically feel the need for subsidies. As for non-profit cultural actors in exile, there is an acceptance of the irreversibility of the worsening situation with targeted assistance from international institutions, which is reorienting the attention of Belarusian organizations to the much broader international grant (and not only) market.

6. **Short planning horizon and focus on solving operational tasks.** The difficult financial situation, high level of competition and limited volume of the cultural market leave almost no resources that can be spent on long-term tasks.
7. **Weak organization and coordination of cultural actors abroad.** Specific conditions of creativity, lack of time and resources, and sometimes competition prevent the construction of a holistic cultural infrastructure and the establishment of systematic interaction between Belarusian cultural actors. In such conditions, it is impossible to develop even a more or less rational scheme of interaction with the public. There were cases when two major events for Belarusians were held in one city at the same time.
8. **The problem of communication between the two parts of Belarusian culture** - inside Belarus and outside it. There are visa restrictions, loss of working contacts, censorship practices and difficulties in accessing independent cultural products produced outside the country... Artists' travel to retreats, educational programmes, participation in non-political cultural events, or simply for tourism and meetings with colleagues - it's one of the few opportunities for real cultural exchange between Belarus and Europe. During the online survey, the following ranking of problems was created that respondents consider most relevant for the development of organizations and initiatives in their field:

Diagram 3. Problem rating¹³

The rankings of the most pressing issues according to the 2023 and 2024 surveys look almost identical: in first place by a wide margin is the problem of financing; second and third places are shared by the lack of effective management and the low level of cooperation between different organizations - these issues are considered relevant by more than half of the participants in both surveys. The next most relevant issues, as in 2023, are the issues of access to the audience and training of personnel.

¹³ When answering the question, you could choose several options from the ones offered.

MAIN RESULTS OF THE STUDY: THE NEW STATUS QUO, TWO TRACKS OF CULTURAL EMIGRATION DEVELOPMENT AND THE END OF ILLUSIONS

Our research was conducted in a situation of “asymmetry of publicity”: cultural figures within the country often work semi-underground, avoiding publicity, which makes them “invisible” for external observation and research. This circumstance often generates an attitude towards Belarus as a “scorched earth”, which contributes to the accumulation of contradictions and desynchronization of understanding of the situation between actors inside and outside the country. Unfortunately, various limitations in collecting information about the situation in Belarus do not allow for a full analysis - and most importantly, to publicly highlight - what is happening inside the country. For this reason, the formulated below conclusions regarding the cultural situation in Belarus are of a limited nature.

1. The division of the cultural field into “those who left” and “those who stayed” is not a problem, but a new status quo. Despite the rhetorical and practical measures of cultural players to maintain ties with the “main land”, we are forced to state the almost parallel development of the two parts of Belarusian culture. The year 2024 brought a clear awareness of the barriers that prevent foreign influence on the cultural situation inside Belarus.

This state of affairs was influenced by several factors. First: financial assistance from abroad is actually banned, the risks in this regard¹⁴ far exceed the possible benefits of circumventing this ban. Second: the gradual exploration of opportunities for autonomous development within the country and abroad. Third: restrictions (risks to personal security, blocking of independent resources, visa restrictions, etc.) that prevent Belarusian creators from at least occasionally taking part in a safe way in the life of the Belarusian cultural emigration and vice versa - emigration in the cultural life within the country (importing cultural products, books, etc.).

¹⁴ Especially considering that many cultural actors outside Belarus who help creators have extremist status within Belarus and contact with them is criminalized.

2. A new “dichotomy”: two trajectories of Belarusian culture in emigration. Previously, when describing the structure of the Belarusian

cultural field, one could observe several “watershed lines”: “state - independent”, “those who left - those who stayed”, etc. In 2024, we can state the emergence of an equally fundamental dividing line: between cultural actors who are trying to stay on the development track of 2020-2021, continuing the political-protest discourse, relying on the backbone of nationally engaged Belarusian emigrants; and between those cultural figures who are trying in one way or another to get out of this audience circle and find a way to realize themselves in the international cultural space.

The decline of political solidarity, the assimilation of the emigrant community, and weak PR are unlikely to allow the initiatives of the first group to achieve positive development dynamics. But the organizations of the second group also face challenges. This is high competition in Western cultural markets and the need to be ready to abandon the Belarusian identification of projects in favour of positioning them as European initiatives (Polish, Lithuanian, etc.), at least at the level of competition applications. The second path of development (reorientation to the international cultural space) cannot be the only way out of the crisis.

¹⁵It is worth noting the importance of support programmes such as ArtPower Belarus, which are implemented with an eye toward understanding the Belarusian cultural context, making them extremely important for keeping Belarusian actors at the centre of the national agenda. programmes such as ArtPower Belarus, which are implemented with an eye toward understanding the Belarusian cultural context, making them extremely important for keeping Belarusian actors at the centre of the national agenda. from the ones offered.

3. New opportunities and new risks. Organizations and initiatives are aware: the way out of stagnation lies in reorienting to local and international audiences, mastering European cultural competitions and programmes, etc. Of course, such an “outing into the world” promises many advantages for Belarusian culture and can qualitatively improve its international positioning, recognition and prestige. But at the same time, such a strategy raises the problem of maintaining the Belarusian context (“Belarusianness”). There is a risk of merging with the European cultural context, especially in the eyes of the audience inside Belarus, given the existing restrictions on access to cultural products produced in emigration¹⁵.

4. From “cultural resistance” to the entertainment industry. Even until 2020, Belarusian independent culture had its own distinctive flair of protest, resistance, and the desire for political freedom. At the same time, political engagement was not inherent in the majority of cultural products: more “peaceful” storylines existed and were in demand. Repressions against the creative elite, strict practices of censorship and

control by the state deprived independent culture of the opportunity to go beyond the “organization of workers’ leisure time”. Therefore, in many ways, the cultural upsurge within the country that can be observed recently has a distinctly entertaining character (master classes, lectures on the classics of world painting, classical music concerts, etc.).

A similar trend is also seen in emigration, but the main reasons for the transition to producing “apolitical” content are the aforementioned exhaustion of political storylines and fatigue with “traumatic” topics.

5. Development through crisis and forced progress. This includes increased professionalism, the development of local and international cultural markets, and the fashion for community building... All of this is, to one degree or another, adaptation to rather unfavourable conditions and challenges. It is still too early to assess this forced progress, but it is important to note the very change in the paradigm in which cultural organizations themselves perceive themselves, as well as the end of many vain hopes, making their “fair share of mistakes”, and the emergence of a “history” of their movement abroad.

DEVELOPMENT DIRECTIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS AND POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

1. The results of the study allow us to identify the flaws in the “transborder” status of Belarusian culture, namely, the signs of the formation of an “archipelago of subcultures.” In addition to the duality of “those who left” and “those who stayed,” other divisions are beginning to appear, which generate new borders and block the interaction of different “subcultural islands” with each other.

If the deepening of the “archipelagic” status is a negative scenario for Belarusian culture, then cultural actors who share this opinion can be offered **measures to overcome contradictions and preserve a single contour of Belarusian culture** (at least with respect to the expatriate part of Belarusian culture):

a) cultivating dialogue and mutual acceptance between different cultural actors who are united by a common situation of emigration, but have different approaches in their practice and ideas about goals. This includes, for example, organizing competitive programmes, creating media strategies that would contribute to the awareness of cultural actors of the value and importance of the contributions of each participant to the common cause. The slogan of such activities is “we need each other”.

b) revision of the conceptual framework in which we think of Belarusian culture, and rethinking the very concept of Belarusian culture. It cannot be said that Belarusian culture in pre-crisis times did not have signs of diversity, which we called an “archipelago of subcultures”. But previously, a common territorial connection and common conditions were the main unifying factors that deproblematized the conceptual definition of Belarusian culture. Today, in the conditions of “transborderism”, individual parts of the cultural field often “fall out” of the focus of attention and rhetoric of various actors-facilitators. For example, the issue of belonging to Belarusian culture is sometimes resolved through the prism of language and tradition, without paying attention to modern abstract Belarusian art, in which there are no obvious references to such “Belarusianness”. In addition, more and more actors are orienting their works towards a foreign audience, while switching to another language.

It is obvious that any efforts to redefine the conceptual content of the concept of “Belarusianness” will most likely lead to new conflicts or simply not be perceived by the majority. Therefore, in our opinion, it is worth turning to the practices of managing the “imaginary reality” of Belarusian culture and organizing a symbolic public space. This involves identifying and designating cultural dominants in the public space, around which discursive practices can be concentrated (journalism, research, media coverage, “new mythology”, trend setting, etc.), followed by practical activities to support these dominants through various initiatives and institutions. As an example of “traditional” dominants, one can cite the Belarusian language and Belarusian literature; “potential” dominants include respect for human life, a general attitude towards peaceful conflict resolution, and non-violence.

Another starting point for reconceptualizing culture could be the integration of the basic notions of culture that underpin the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. This conceptual framework is instrumental and relevant to this stage of cultural development.

c) Development and implementation of a general PR strategy. Now, when a significant part of the audience of Belarusian cultural activities has narrowed to a core that is almost not growing with new participants, the cultural sector more than ever feels the need to **“warm up the audience” and forcefully represent the subjects that are currently operating in the Belarusian cultural sphere.** Our interlocutors believe that there are many talented individuals in the Belarusian diasporas who can and should be included in the cultural turnover. But these individuals simply do not know about the existing Belarusian cultural opportunities. They also talk about the need to form a strong strategy for promoting and attracting attention to the Belarusian cultural sphere, since it is this task that can become the core around which systematic and strategic interaction of cultural actors will be built. At least, most of the experts consciously expressed their willingness to engage in such cooperation.

In addition, a coherent PR strategy is also needed to reach the local and international levels. One of the infrastructure elements of a general PR campaign can be representational and discussion platforms for public discussions and proposals for “policies” in the field of cultural development. Here it is important to talk not only about making specific commitments, but also to set the tone by demonstrating “success stories”, identifying trends, compiling and publicly presenting cultural rankings, presenting reports on the activities of entities, etc. Thus, we are talking about the formation of a “field of mutual orientations” for cultural entities, which will have the opportunity to independently choose the most suitable development models for themselves, focus on successful or attractive cases, join certain practices, etc.

d) Lobbying for visa and tourism support for cultural figures living in Belarus, expanding safe practices of retreats, residencies, trips, and participation in educational and cultural events abroad. This is perhaps the most urgent need.

2. Strengthening the voice of Belarus on the international stage by expanding the representation of Belarusian culture outside Belarus.

After 2022, the wave of international community solidarity with Belarusian problems has understandably declined, which has also affected the interest of various platforms and international players. Today, there is a need for more sustainable formats for representing Belarusian culture on the international stage.

One potential way to solve the problem is to intensify work on including Belarus, represented by independent cultural actors in exile, in the Creative Europe programme. This involves joint work of organizations to lobby and fulfill the necessary requirements for participating countries. Inclusion in the programme will open up opportunities for real mastering the practices of developing cultural and creative industries and implementing the updated conceptual foundations discussed in point 1b.

3. Strengthening competitiveness by improving the managerial competencies of cultural actors. The lack of basic management competencies hinders the development of creators in the conditions of the European market. An important task is the creation of a “Belarusian school of cultural management”: it is not only about creating educational initiatives, but also about the formation of managerial attitudes in the cultural figures themselves. It is also important to have opportunities for organizing phased support for creative projects.

4. Research and analytical work. One of the flexible tools for “managing” culture is to identify and present relevant analytical information to a wide range of actors interested in the development of Belarusian culture. Regular monitoring should be conducted, with the help of which it would be possible to inventory and visualize cultural practices. Due to the limited public representation of cultural actors located in Belarus, the task of identifying and describing the field should be solved without reference to the activities of specific subjects and initiatives - through monitoring and recording general trends in “official” and “independent” cultures, analyzing their narratives, the nature of influence, and problems of the cultural market (tracking the consumption of certain cultural products, narrowing and expanding the offer, etc.).