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Resistance Across Borders: Belarusian Civic Activism in Exile under (Trans-)National Repression

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Abstract

The mass protests following the rigged 2020 presidential elections in Belarus led to unprecedented repression, resulting in the liquidation of over 1,600 NGOs, the imprisonment of hundreds of activists, and the displacement of thousands. After relocating, these activists continued to mobilize resources and use digital platforms to sustain and expand their support networks across borders. Urban activists played a pivotal role in this transformation, though they acutely felt the challenges of relocation due to their dependence on physical urban spaces and their ties to support networks and governmental bodies. This paper investigates the challenges faced by urban activists, post-relocation, as well as their resource mobilization strategies, utilizing surveys of 47 Belarusian NGOs and conducting 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with urban development experts. It contributes to the understanding of civic activism in exile, emphasizing the strategic use of resources to reorganize activity and resist transnational repression of authoritarian regimes.

Keywords

Civic Activism; Resource Mobilization; Urban Activists; Transnational Repression; Belarus

Introduction

The 2020 civic mobilization in Belarus has garnered scholarly interest due to its unprecedented scale and impact (Kazharski 2021). For over two decades, opposition activists struggled to undermine Lukashenka's authority, often gaining momentum during elections (Minchenia 2020). In 2020, Belarus saw a surge in mass mobilization after disputed elections and police violence against demonstrators. Digital channels facilitated protests, with urban activists playing a pivotal role (Mateo 2022). The harsh crackdown by Lukashenka's regime led to the imprisonment and repression of protesters, with tens of thousands detained and subjected to torture and violence. Many activists fled the country, facing displacement and resource loss. Some relocated to Ukraine, which shares a similar culture and language and where many had relatives and professional networks. However, in 2022, they were forced to move again due to Russia's military intervention and Belarus' alignment with the aggressor. Ukraine froze activists' bank accounts and suspended the renewal of temporary residence permits. Those who moved to the EU faced challenges integrating into a new cultural and economic environment. Lithuania and Poland, which traditionally support Belarus' democratic movement, offered the best relocation conditions by providing humanitarian visas to those affected by repression.

The issue of relocation particularly affected Belarusian urban activists, whose work was inherently tied to a specific urban context. They were forced to find ways to address new difficulties, making it challenging to reestablish their civic activities in a different legal and social framework. This paper reveals the challenges faced by urban activists shortly after relocation and examines their strategies for navigating these obstacles. It focuses on their mobilization of available resources and the development of a digital infrastructure to support their activities.

Background

The 2020 protest in Belarus, sparked by the regime's negligence towards COVID-19 and rigged elections, was sustained by networks built by civic groups, with urban activists forming the backbone (Author 1 and Author 2 2021). Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, urban activism fostered meaningful civic initiatives, empowering citizens to challenge government decisions. Even during harsh repressions between 2011 and 2017, local authorities considered urban activists' opinions (Author 1 2019). Activists pushed for new recreational areas, parks, green zones, bike paths, and playgrounds, and used e-petitions to highlight issues with estates, communal services, and transportation. Despite political hardships, urban issues remained a focus, allowing limited cooperation between authorities and civil society. Following the 2020 protests, many trusted by the government urban activists were forced to leave due to their involvement in the protests, seen as treachery by authorities.

To summarize, the case of post-2020 Belarusian urban activists stands out from other sectors of civil society for two main reasons. First, activists had successfully established communication channels with authorities, addressing social and urban issues through non-political means. This history of cooperation and visible impact makes this sector particularly relevant for study. Second, their resource base was closely connected to the urban environment, so relocation caused a rupture with familiar work mechanisms and networks, abandonment of projects, and the need to find new formats and resources. Thus, examining their adaptation strategies and transfer of skills and resources provides valuable insights and contributes to resource mobilization theory.

Aim and Research Questions

This paper aims to explore the aftermath of the 2020 Belarusian civic mobilization by analyzing the challenges and opportunities encountered by the urban activists who relocated abroad and the ways they used to tackle these problems. In this context, the main research questions are as follows:

- Which problems do Belarusian civic activists deal with due to relocation, from the perspective of post-2020 fleeing repression?
- How do they adapt and mobilize available resources to integrate into a new environment and reorganize their activity after relocation?

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, it delves into literature review on civic mobilization under conditions of (trans-)national repression, as well as resource mobilization and involvement of diasporic communities. Second, the paper describes a theoretical framework to conceptualize the civic engagement of urban activists abroad. Findings summarize the ways of engagement of the Belarusian civil society in exile, proceeding from the available resources and pressing constraints.

Civic Mobilization under Conditions of (trans-)national Repression

Studies on mobilizing in repressive authoritarian contexts focus on long-term transformations of civic consciousness. The ability and will to mobilize and cooperate in response to harsh measures against protesters are explained within civic mobilization theory by McCarthy & Wolfson (1992), and Rafail &Freitas (2017). Karatnycky and Ackerman (2005) argue that changes in civic consciousness can erode the support base of authoritarian governments. Adamson (2020) explains how authoritarian regimes exert coercive power across borders, employing strategies to suppress, monitor, intimidate, and harass diasporic activists. In a globalized world, physical borders no longer serve as barriers to repressive tactics (Moss, Michaelsen, & Kennedy 2022). Long-distance authoritarianism involves using digital surveillance and coercion to extend repressive reach internationally, affecting activism. Thus, the resilience of diasporic movements hinges on their ability to mobilize resources, navigate political opportunities, and counteract transnational repression effectively (Adamson 2020; Moss, Michaelsen, & Kennedy 2022).

In countering transnational repression, the concept of resilience in civic mobilization is critical to understanding how relocated activists navigate and sustain efforts in varying political environments. The theory of political opportunity structure explains how external political environments shape the opportunities and constraints for social movements. This framework has evolved (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; García Martín & Perugorría 2024) to account for how changes in political contexts, such as shifts in state policies and cross-border pressure, affect the emergence, strategies, and success of civic mobilizations. In authoritarian regimes like Belarus, political opportunities are limited by state repression, censorship, and the lack of democratic institutions. Studies (for example Wijermars & Lokot 2022) show that under such conditions, social movements must adopt flexible strategies, leverage international support, and use non-traditional actions such as digital platforms and decentralized organizing tactics. Conversely, in democratic contexts, civic mobilization benefits from institutional access, legal protections, and greater public support. However, they also face challenges such as maintaining cohesion, dealing with institutional constraints, and accessing funding, information, and local networks (Della Porta 2020). These differences in political opportunities highlight the adaptability and strategic diversity of Belarusian activists transitioning from an authoritarian context to a democratic one.

Despite extensive research, there remains a gap in understanding the transnational aspects of mobilization, particularly in how movements adapt to new environments that are resistant to conversion, such as urban settings. The resilience of diasporic mobilization amid transnational repression, including digital surveillance, is underexplored. This study extends resource mobilization theory to analyze diasporic community resources and resilience mechanisms against transnational repression. It explores how these movements deploy resources despite digital surveillance, aiming to understand strategies enabling effective mobilization in challenging transnational contexts.

Diaspora mobilization and accessing resources for transnational activism

We utilize resource mobilization theory to examine the impact of post-2020 Belarusian civic mobilization from afar, analyzing challenges and opportunities of the diaspora's use of resources. Diaspora communities' ability to organize and mobilize influences both host countries and their country of origin. They challenge Belarus' authoritarian regime through activism (Moss 2020), utilizing host community finances, lobbying, and breaking information monopolies with personal narratives.

Mobilization is part of the political opportunity structure and refers to groups evolving from passive collective to participatory members of a social movement (Tilly 1978). Belarusian diasporas face unique challenges, lacking homeland networks and resources (Moss 2016). External factors influence mobilization capacity (Meyer & Minkoff 2004), contingent on their new socio-political environments post-relocation. While external resources enhance mobilization (Tilly 1978), internal resources also play crucial roles.

Diaspora mobilization is shaped by external factors such as host country policies and international solidarity (Kopchick et al. 2022), as well as internal dynamics within communities. Resources – economic, social, and political assets – can originate from both inside and outside the diaspora (Gregg et al. 2020), bolstering collective action. However, attitudes towards mobilization outweigh material resources (Tilly 1978). Without a shared identity, personal ties to the homeland, and effective collective action mechanisms, external support structures may struggle to translate into tangible impact on the ground. While Tilly (1978) acknowledges the importance of resources for diaspora mobilization, Gregg et al. (2020) argue that this model lacks a detailed focus on them. Resources vary widely and play a critical role in fostering commitment, empowering activists, and ensuring continued involvement in social movements (Van Dyke & Dixon 2013). Contextual factors, including interactions with governments and host countries, affect resource availability.

Mobilization hinges on a shared identity rooted in language, heritage, culture, or opposition to a regime. This collective identity fosters proactive solidarity, where members recognize their shared interest in addressing homeland challenges. Adamson & Demetriou (2007) characterize diasporas as social collectives maintaining a shared identity across borders, facilitated by cohesion and ties to their homeland, enabling organized transnational efforts to pursue collective interests. Shared identity is central to diasporas, uniting them, providing security, and supporting homeland development (Sökefeld 2006). Personal connections with compatriots in the home country deeply motivate diaspora members to engage, empathize, and support compatriots' struggles.

Mobilization dynamics in diaspora professional communities, like urban activists, channel individual sentiments into organized advocacy and activism. Through grassroots initiatives, social networks, and digital platforms, relocated activists coordinate actions to address shared challenges. Demmers (2002) notes diasporas' growing political influence, bolstered by de-territorialized identities and platforms like Telegram, signalling shifts in mobilization. Digitized transnational spaces have revolutionized diaspora activism, enhancing communication and organization (Demmers 2002). This evolution amplifies diasporas' global impact, as seen in Moss's work (2016, 2020) on digital activism and transnational networks driving change. Digital resources play a crucial role in empowering social movements (Van Dyke & Dixon 2013).

Diaspora mobilization develops through a symbiotic relationship between external influences and internal resource gathering (Moss 2020), fostering collective action. By nurturing both aspects, diaspora communities fortify themselves against transnational repression and work towards positive change for their homelands and fellow diaspora members. In Belarus, oppressed activists seek solutions to pressing issues and contribute to democracy-building from abroad. Digital technologies play a crucial role in revitalizing their efforts (Wijermars & Lokot 2022), transforming organizations, maintaining connections, and forming new

networks. This also illustrates how political opportunity structures shape their capacity to act in new socio-political environments.

For relocated activists, resource mobilization amid transnational repression involves strategically gathering, reorganizing, and allocating resources across international personal and professional networks based on solidarity and shared interests. This mobilization aims to adapt to new contexts while resisting coercive measures from repressive regime. It relies on personal and collective resilience strategies, international support networks, advanced cybersecurity measures, and digital technologies for communication and coordination, all while navigating the challenges of operating under constant threat from authoritarian regime.

Methodology

The study focuses on urban activism in Belarus from September to December 2022, employing a mixed-method approach. We conducted an online survey with 47 participants and semi-structured interviews with 20 urban experts specializing in development, planning, environmental protection, and heritage. These experts play significant roles in shaping urban policies and advocating for sustainability.

Interviewees were selected from 47 surveyed organisations, proceeding from the visibility of NGOs within the Belarusian civic urban community and their impact. Before 2020, urban activists were the primary group maintaining effective communication with local and national authorities to address social and urban issues, often through petitions. However, post-2020, their involvement in protests led to forced relocations driven by safety concerns and supportive networks abroad. Communication between activists and officials ceased, and mutual perceptions soured, exacerbated by government crackdowns on NGOs and independent voices.

Displaced NGOs faced challenges adapting activities to new environments, with relocation decisions influenced by diasporic communities and opportunities to rebuild networks. Many respondents either fled Belarus or operated discreetly due to repression, losing vital resources such as professional spaces, networks, and relationships with authorities. The analysis of urban activists' positions provides insights into Belarusian civil society both within the country and abroad.

DATA COLLECTION

The data collection proceeded in two phases. The first involved an empirical study of oppositional urban activists in Belarus, both local and relocated - a survey targeting 47 members of urban NGOs. The second phase examined strategies for addressing challenges identified in the survey's open-ended questions. From the initial survey respondents, 20 were chosen for semi-structured interviews based on their expertise and leadership within their NGOs, ensuring diverse perspectives across urban planning, ecology, and urban studies (See Table 1). These experts offered detailed insights into urban activism post-2020, with implications for Belarusian civil society.

The results of our survey reflect opinions from key Belarusian urbanist NGOs. Responses were gathered using snowball sampling via secure thematic Telegram and Facebook groups in June 2022. Respondents were located in Belarus (39%), Ukraine (17%), Lithuania (13%), Germany (7%), Poland (4%), Georgia (2%), with 17 % choosing not to disclose their country due to security concerns. Most respondents were young Belarusian citizens: 29.8 % aged 18-30, and 68.1 % aged 31-45. Of the respondents, 55.3 %were women, and 2.2 % identified as non-binary, and 42.5 % were men. The survey and interview questionnaires focused on four main categories: (1) NGOs' profile (legal status, activities, relocation country); (2) challenges and new activities post-2020; (3) use of digital technologies (digital literacy, tools); (4) survival/resistance strategies and networking roles. The statistical information presented in this research, expressed as percentages, is derived from survey data.

Table 1.   Interview Respondents' Profiles

Sphere of activity of NGOs' respondents	Organization's code	Current status
Ecology	NGO1	Liquidated in Belarus, registered abroad
	NGO2	Publicly ceased activities
	NGO3	Registered in Poland
	NGO4	Liquidated in Belarus
	NGO5	Functions in Belarus
Urban planning	NGO6	Liquidated in Belarus
	NGO9	
	NGO11	
	NGO10	Liquidated in Belarus, registered abroad
	NGO7	Functions in Belarus
	NGO8	
	NGO14	
	NGO13	
	NGO12	Registered in Lithuania
Education and research (urban studies)	NGO15	Registered abroad
Education (urban studies)	NGO16	Functions in Belarus
	NGO17	Liquidated in Belarus
	NGO18	Liquidated in Belarus, registered abroad
	NGO19	Closed by the founders
	NGO20	Liquidated in Belarus, registered in Poland

In the development of the questionnaire for in-depth interviews, we used a sensitive-to-political context approach that is suitable for respondents who experienced political persecution. Recognizing the potential for emotional discomfort that might arise during the interview, we implemented measures to mitigate such effects, ensuring a considerate and respectful engagement. A consent form with ethics protocol served as the guideline for our interaction. It prioritizes security and mental well-being of all participants, guiding our approach to communication with a deep sense of responsibility and empathy.

Data analysis used thematic and axial coding strategies. Thematic coding identified patterns like post-2020 challenges, resource mobilization, digital tool usage, and adaptation strategies. Axial coding explored relationships between these themes, providing a framework showing how repression affected network loss, relocation, and digital tool use. This approach provided insights into how urban activists mobilize resources under constraints, aligning with the resource mobilization theory guiding the study.

Regarding data management, the information obtained through the research process was systematically recorded in an Excel spreadsheet, which was then securely stored on a password-protected computer. This

procedure was not only aimed at safeguarding the confidentiality of the participants but also at ensuring the precision and reliability of data processing and analysis.

LIMITATIONS

Our study includes the narrow scope of respondents (47 in total), focusing solely on digitally adept urban activists from Belarus who use platforms like Telegram. This group's skills in digital environments may not represent broader political contexts or other demographics, limiting the research's external validity. Focus on relocated activists overlooks civic activists within Belarus facing severe constraints and official government influences shaping political dynamics, which could affect their strategies and goals independently. Additionally, we did not explore differences across relocation countries, warranting further research on integration strategies for Belarusians in varied contexts. Our emphasis on digital tools stems from their pivotal role in the 2020 Belarusian civic mobilization, potentially overshadowing offline organizing efforts, a limitation that future research should address.

Mode of Operation of Belarusian Urban Development Organizations after 2020

The mass protests against Lukashenka's regime demonstrated significant changes in Belarusian society post-2020. The demand for human rights, freedoms, and democratic values now outweighs the traditional social contract where citizens trade political participation for a higher standard of living. Numerous Belarusians were arrested for participating in these demonstrations, with activists often notified of arrest warrants through various channels.

Our survey revealed that at least 50 % of organizations were liquidated, while 20 % continued small-scale projects. Notably, 30 % of organizations were reregistered in other countries. The liquidation led to a situation when only a few organizations remained active in the sector mimicking the current context. Political persecution has decimated the civil sector in Belarus, causing many activists to flee abroad, leading to a significant 'brain drain' that has hindered citizen-centered urban development.

Many were forced to relocate abroad, adapt to new lives and formats of work and find partners. The representative of NGO3, which continued its work in Poland, emphasized that 'it took time and resources to adapt and re-register in another country, given that nobody helped' (NGO3).

Changes in the scale of activities and services of organizations become particularly indicative. Presumably, the most mobile and adaptable were representatives of organizations which operated at the national level, not to mention international ones, as they could more easily convert their resources. That said, the major strategies of survival of the urban activists could be divided into the following three broad categories.

EXPANDING SCOPE OF ACTIVITY

As the description of participants above showed, 50 % of the respondents were affiliated with organizations with national coverage. The remaining 50 % of respondents represented organizations that covered the regional or local level. Regarding the target audience, the respondents' activities were mostly focused on providing people-to-people services (70%). At the same time, 30 % of respondents admitted that the choice of the target audience for them depended on the purpose of the project, so local self-government is also targeted. After relocation, the majority of the organizations, formerly aiming to provide services to people in Belarus, had to adjust to the new environment, expand the scope of activities and develop services oriented towards the diaspora. Some started consulting newly relocated organizations, assisting them with fundraising initiatives (NGO3), and with building relationships with foreign partners (NGO12). The transition from a national to a diasporic focus has allowed these organizations to tap into the intellectual

capital present within their dispersed communities. This includes leveraging the skills, knowledge, and connections of individuals in the diaspora.

EXPLORING NEW THEMATIC FIELDS TO DIVERSIFY RESOURCE BASE

The main area of activity of the surveyed organizations was urban planning and educational services in urban development, as well as civic activism and volunteering in addressing social and environmental issues. Support for informal educational initiatives has provided dissemination of knowledge on sustainable development of urban systems within the focused project initiatives to improve and preserve urban spaces. To adapt to new conditions some of the organizations had to change thematic focus in order to search for resources with which to continue their activities. In search of funding, organizations started dealing with the topics of sustainable development and ecology (e.g. exploring ecological ramifications of war in Belarusian and Ukrainian border regions) rather than being preoccupied with urban development in Minsk (NGO1, NGO3). Their activities also depended on available data: some were aimed at Belarusians within the country, while others fit a regional agenda, covering environmental consequences of the war in cross-border regions of Ukraine and Russia (NGO1). Thus, these organizations leveraged existing networks and mobilized new ones to adapt to the evolving political and social landscape, extending their activities beyond national borders, engaging with regional and international issues to secure resources and support. Simultaneously, they recognized the limitations of previous networks and technologies that were no longer aligned with their goals.

'SAFE AND OPTIMIZED': COMING UP WITH NEW FORMATS OF WORK

While being in Belarus, NGOs provided educational services to raise awareness about cultural heritage, principles of citizen-centered urban development, and its history. This large segment of their activity was also the most 'neutral', as opposed to such activities as online petitions and participation in public discussion on urban transformation (where such 'political' issues were raised, out of necessity to take into account the opinion of citizens in development of urban districts). Educational activities aimed to inform and empower citizens, offering online courses and organizing events to foster democratic foundations through people-to-people services, involving more actors in the use and development of initiatives to make urban spaces more citizen-centered and sustainable. Respondents mentioned such forms of their activities as joint street walks (NGO4, NGO15, NGO17), meetings with urban experts (NGO15, NGO16, NGO17, NGO18, NGO19, NGO20), conferences (NGO15), discussion platforms (NGO1, NGO6, NGO8, NGO13), "animated libraries" (NGO7), marathons (NGO9, NGO19), promo days (NGO3, NGO4), festivals (NGO1, NGO2, NGO10) , coaching sessions (NGO1-NGO20), and master classes (NGO1-NGO20).

Now operating from across a border, 15 % resorted to drafting appeals and online petitions and published reviews and recommendations in the public domain. Five % provided consulting, strengthened networks, held master classes, conducted peer reviews, offered expertise for program development and international technical assistance projects, organized exhibitions, launched information campaigns, created methodological manuals, organized summer schools and study tours, and conducted environmental events like 'eco trails'.

After relocating, the respondents increasingly engaged with the alternative formats of work, including 'predominantly digital instruments' (NGO1). NGOs became more active in the digital environment, launching online educational courses, publishing in digital media, dealing with SMM, and disseminating analytical materials (10%). Another 10% conducted research, surveys, online seminars, podcasts, educational YouTube videos, live broadcasts, online meetings, swap parties, and collected proposals from local citizens. These organizations implemented various activities and interactions with their target audience. Many

began live broadcasting on Instagram to promote their work and expand their reach. To ensure team safety, activists used information encryption services.

The transition to digital activism highlights the importance of resources, networks, and technologies in maintaining and restoring the activities of Belarusian activists. While traditional, face-to-face methods were hindered, the digital realm provided a relatively safer and more accessible alternative. The ability to adapt to online formats allowed NGOs to continue their advocacy work, maintain their presence, and reach new audiences, despite the challenging political landscape in Belarus.

Problems and Challenges of Resource Mobilization faced by NGOs

Repression changed the activities of most civic organizations, as the prevalent majority of the interviewees recognized (all, except organisations NGO5, NGO7, NGO14, NGO17). NGO1-4, NGO8, NGO6, NGO9, NGO10-12, NGO15, NGO16, NGO18-20 reported significant changes, with NGO13 saying their activities changed just partially and only NGO7 and NGO14 admitting that the content and format of work remained the same. The organizations were forced to change the format and thematic focus: they could no longer conduct official offline meetings due to security concerns, their organizations were subjected to liquidation as legal entities with all the ensuing consequences for development, they lost legal access to any funding opportunities from abroad (as it is considered a crime to get funding from foreign donors, according to the current legislation in Belarus).

The respondents indicated that almost all types of the resources available to them in Belarus (cultural environment, language, accessible infrastructure, support of community, membership network, relatively stable source of income, informal connections with governmental bodies), became limited or not available after relocation. In the new environment, much depends on the organization's capacities to convert available resources and cover the gaps that emerged as a result of the crisis. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the range of these issues only expanded: potential donors and partners cut off contacts with the Belarusian NGOs, while the financial support to the Belarusian civil society has been delimited.

The repressions, subsequent relocation and the war in Ukraine significantly increased the competition for resources in the sector and, at the same time, put small organizations that were unable to withstand the pressure of the circumstances at a disadvantage. On the other hand, the competitive dominance of well-known organizations that are trusted by donors only increased. Thus, the recently launched, small or unstable organizations experienced significant difficulties in continuing operations (NGO4, NGO6, NGO9, NGO11, NGO17). As a result, the growth of the sector stalled, which had a negative impact on democratic development of society and the potential democratization of the country as a whole. Informants mentioned several factors, influencing the change in their activities: the reduction of the team, the relocation of members abroad due to security threats, direct repression/imprisonment; inability to communicate with authorities; psychological trauma, stress, and increased anxiety; the need to adapt to living in other country; fear of sharing personal information (NGO15).

But the foremost concern is ensuring both digital and physical safety as this fundamental requirement up until now remains unmet for everyone. This situation has had crucial consequences for the resources available for the activists. We differentiate between *material* (finances), *moral* ('legitimacy, solidarity, and sympathetic support'), *cultural* ('artifacts and cultural products'), *social–organizational* ('infrastructures, social networks, and organizations'), and *human* (leaders and participants) resources accessible to urban activists (Edwards & McCarthy 2004).

Regarding *moral resources,* the situation was two-dimensional. NGOs lost officially recognized legitimacy in Belarus due to persecution, yet their internal solidarity increased. The loss of registration was perceived as a sign of the sociopolitical importance of their activities, motivating further development. Representatives of NGO9 explained that liquidation forced them to keep a low profile and practice self-censorship. Access

to information and target audiences remained restricted, necessitating the development of hidden networks, media channels, and communication strategies.

Both Belarusians within the country and diasporic communities expressed sympathetic support and solidarity towards activists by providing financial means and consultation support. However, this period was marked by increasing international sanctions against Belarus due to its participation in the military invasion of Ukraine. While Belarusians initially felt the global community's support after the 2020 protests, by 2022, they felt condemned and lumped together with the Lukashenka regime, viewing themselves as its victims as well.

As interviewees themselves mentioned (NGO3, NGO16, NGO2), one of the possible strategic solutions could be lifting sanctions on Belarusian civil society, and this is the task that could be fulfilled via the advocacy work in EU institutions. The sanctions were imposed due to Belarus's role as an accomplice in Russia's attack on Ukraine. These participants noted that relocated NGOs serve as an opposition force against the Lukashenka regime and need support. Specifically, they require the reinstatement of permissions to participate in grant funding competitions, as these grants are the main financial resource for Belarusian NGOs in exile. To achieve this, participants (NGO10 and NGO12) discussed the search for available tools of digital democracy, such as petitions and communication platforms. These tools would allow them to voice their opinions and propose revisions to the EU's restrictive policy towards Belarusians.

As for *material resources,* the majority of Belarusian NGOs relied on two major sources of funding: financial support accumulated through the donations from the target audience and/or members of NGOs and international grants. However, foreign support for Belarusian NGOs has been challenging due to banking restrictions, with transfers often blocked until NGOs provide proof of fund usage. To circumvent this, some NGOs used foreign bank accounts (NGO3 and NGO12) to withdraw funds for local activities. After relocation, they lost access to office space and physical presence in the country. Additionally, police confiscated equipment during searches, and activists had to find new technical resources to implement their projects. Representatives of NGO2 recognized that 'international grants were the main source of funding,' and when this support ceased, NGOs 'lost the ability to operate'. Most activists also lost their jobs, which were their main sources of income, after which they 'started operating as experts' (NGO1).

The challenges faced by Belarusian activists underscore the importance of stable resource flows and the detrimental impact of their disruption. The loss of access to these networks and resources illustrates a critical gap that undermines the activists' capacity for mobilization and sustained action. The Belarusian government's restrictive measures represent a closed political opportunity structure, limiting the avenues available for effective activism. The combination of resource depletion, loss of physical presence, and restricted financial support creates an environment where traditional methods of activism are no longer viable. It is evident that the restoration of Belarusian activists to their previous levels of activity hinges on re-establishing access to both material and network resources. The role of digital technology becomes pivotal in this restoration process, as activists will need to leverage new platforms and tools to organize, communicate, and mobilize effectively in a more constrained environment.

Our interviewees (NGO15, NGO20, NGO13) suggested a solution: they mentioned that issues of integration, mentorship, and providing assistance in solving basic relocation problems and finding a stable source of income should be raised in communication with local administration of the countries where the activists settled. They referred to this as a sustainable foundation to continue building and developing networking within the diaspora urban environment, connecting them with local groups, and beginning work on the global goal of sustainable development. This work particularly focuses on 'sustainable cities and communities' in international cooperation, exchanging, and accumulating necessary resources, primarily knowledge of standards and project opportunities for the civil sector to engage in this work on a cross-national level.

All of the NGOs (1- 20) described the situation with *social-organizational resources (infrastructure, social networks, and management)* in the following way**:** In Belarus, registering NGOs faced significantly more challenges than commercial ventures, illustrating how political opportunity structures shape social movements. Government-organized NGOs (GoNGOs) enjoyed favorable conditions and exclusive financial privileges, reflecting a differentiated allocation within the social-organizational cluster of resources. After 2020, connections with intended communities eroded, largely due to hurdles in accessing conventional communication channels like face-to-face gatherings and public events. In response to heightened repression, anonymizing personal information and concealing volunteer identities in publicized social initiatives became necessary. This fostered a culture of self-censorship, affecting communications and activities in both digital and physical realms. Consequently, organizational visibility declined sharply, leading to reduced community engagement. Growing security concerns caused a portion of the community to 'withdraw from active communication and participation' (NGO 20), highlighting the challenges in sustaining and nurturing social networks and organizational engagement in a restrictive environment.

To utilize the resources of host countries most effectively, interviewees (NGO7, NGO3, NGO9) proposed that the Belarusian diaspora should intensify their network interactions and emerge into safe digital spaces. Relocated activists integrating into local communities could bring valuable experiences and knowledge that benefit other community members. Exchanging experiences and ideas can accelerate integration within the Belarusian diaspora and enhance the collective resource potential of their community. Connections with communities in Belarus, retained by many diaspora members, also enrich the collective pool of available resources. This includes the familiar language environment, cultural ties, and a connection to the territory that unites the diaspora globally, often maintained only digitally.

In the realm of *human resource*s, the intensified pressures led to a significant exodus of activists from the country, with those who remained opting to maintain a low profile and disengage from activities. For instance, NGO1 and NGO6 faced repression that impacted its operations: its members were subject to searches and interrogations, leading to some being imprisoned, others facing administrative charges and subsequently relocating. Ultimately, NGO1 was dissolved. This environment markedly hindered the ability to engage and motivate volunteers in-person (offline) from abroad. NGOs also became increasingly aware of the partisanship (NGO17).

Access to *cultural resources*, such as common language, publicly available expert knowledge, conceptual approaches, and various cultural artifacts, is crucial for attracting and mobilizing new members for collective action. Urban activists in Belarus lost access to many of these resources when authorities seized their social media accounts and repressed administrators, confiscating literature and other materials during searches of offices and apartments. To mitigate these risks and challenges, many activists relocated to countries with common cultural backgrounds such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Poland. They began converting available cultural resources to adapt to their new environments. For example, NGO3 started using its site as a media portal in both Belarusian and Polish, allowing Poles to read news about the situation in Belarus.

That said, after relocation, urban activists started investing efforts into the generation of new knowledge base and new artefacts. Regarding knowledge, NGOs mostly meant integration into new cultural backgrounds: learning language, local culture and history (NGO6, NGO10), and also understanding of approaches to urban design of hosting communities as well as use of digital instruments in smartization of urban environment (NGO9).

Leveraging digital technologies for resource mobilization

Both relocated and remaining NGOs in Belarus have adapted by leveraging digital technologies for resource mobilization and reorganization. Digital platforms facilitate connections with their homeland, including

families, social, and professional networks. Newly emerged diasporic communities increasingly use digital technologies to sustain work during transitions, manage projects, and engage transnationally (NGO16).

Through the lens of social mobilization theory (Moss 2020), the adaptation of Belarusian NGOs is seen as a strategic shift to utilize digital platforms for mobilizing resources, organizing activities, and maintaining connections. Digital platforms have become crucial for these organizations to coordinate their activities, engage with supporters, and manage projects despite geographical dislocation. The NGOs' increased online engagement and remote collaboration with partners illustrate their transition to transnational activism, leveraging digital tools to sustain their efforts against the authoritarian regime and advocate for democratic values. By adopting online communication, social media, and digital content creation, these organizations have managed to maintain their activism and expand their reach beyond Belarus.

Interviews revealed that in such circumstances NGOs increasingly rely on online communication, engage more actively with media resources and social networks, and seek new digital tools to optimize work processes. Efforts to reach new audiences and raise funds for fellows in Belarus include social media, remote collaboration with partners, and developing online courses and workshops (NGO8, NGO5). The intensified use of digital technologies by NGOs is a response to security risks, allowing safe cooperation with teams from different countries and broader outreach (NGO9).

Due to repressive legislation, offline activities have become dangerous. NGOs like NGO6 have shifted to producing video content and organizing online events instead of traditional activities. The threat of repression has driven further digitization, with a representative of NGO7 linking digital content creation to 'paranoia about security'.

Overall, the events of 2020 have been a catalyst for organizations to succeed digitally, thus becoming more visible both in Belarus and abroad. Gradually acclimating in the host countries and integrating into the new sociopolitical environment with its resource capacities, they enriched their arsenal of methods. Obviously, the first years after relocation cannot be considered effective in optimizing civic activity, as they are primarily occupied with settling domestic issues. Nevertheless, this period became decisive in laying the foundations for the deep democratic transformation of an entire sector. The stress from repression and relocation forced urban activists to intensify development of skills and to reconstruct a digital resource base for more effective work. The active takeover of this digital niche, the increase in their digital presence in project results and created products, cannot but impact the sector's development, enriching it with international knowledge, experience, and it also contributes to adherence to standards of peer-to-peer services.

This strengthened their positions in digital security, which allows preserving the accumulated resources in the long term. Primarily, the main financial resource of urban activists is the money from international funds, which they attract through projects. This type of activity – any interaction with 'Western donors' – is perceived in Belarus as undermining the foundations of the regime (NGO11, NGO19). Digitalization has significantly eased the task of fundraising through this channel; however, it has also opened the door to digital surveillance and accusations of state treason (against the Lukashenka regime). To enhance digital security, NGOs started using secure messengers (NGO1, NGO2, NGO3, NGO5, NGO8, NGO9, NGO11, NGO13, NGO14-17, NGO20), such as Signal, social networks (NGO1-6, NGO8, NGO9, NGO11, NGO15, NGO18-20), online secure communication platforms (NGO1-4, NGO9-12, NGO13, NGO15-19); and information storage services (NGO1-5, NGO7-9, NGO18-19).

The digitization of the activities has heightened NGOs' interest in acquiring knowledge and mastering resourceful opportunities in the digital environment for smarter mobilization and advocacy. Respondents (NGO12, NGO13, NGO14, NGO18) mentioned the following types of most needed assistance:

- financial support for digital resources and equipment;
- courses on digital literacy and e-democracy tools;

- workshops on creating educational content;
- training on digital security covering legal and technical aspects;
- courses on project management, fundraising and crowdfunding and monetization of activities;
- training on digital security, project management, fundraising, and blockchain technologies;
- guides on digital marketing, product promotion, and secure financial software.

Digital resources enable NGOs to transcend geographical boundaries, facilitating international cooperation and experience exchange. From the perspective of political opportunity structure, digital tools help NGOs to better exploit political opportunities by connecting with new partners, attracting grants and project financing, and enhancing personal and collective security measures. However, only four NGOs (NGO1, NGO3, NGO7, NGO18) surveyed have a digital transformation plan to reorganize their activities in a new environment in a more efficient and safe way. Another nine voiced a need for such a plan (NGO2, NGO4, NGO8-10, NGO12-14, NGO20). A clear strategy mitigates the risk of losing target audiences and provides optimized solutions for preserving resources NGOs obtained. At the same time, threats of digitalization are still less discovered.

Consequently, digitization offers both significant opportunities and challenges. It enhances connectivity, resource sharing, and international cooperation, essential for sustaining activism in exile and under repression. New information and knowledge allow activists to invest resources in the development of artefacts, products, or services they deal with or produce, such as educational content for their courses, websites and communication channels, analytical reports (NGO4). Adaptation and investment in reaching new resources contribute to resilience and strategic evolution in response to their displacement and the challenges they face. It enables connectivity, resource sharing, and international cooperation, essential for sustaining activism in exile. However, without a clear digitalization strategy, NGOs risk falling short of their mobilization and advocacy goals. Engaging with diasporic communities, host country, and European policymakers through strategic digital initiatives can help mitigate these risks and harness the full potential of digital resources for social mobilization and transnational activism.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study reveal the problems faced by Belarusian urban development NGOs and activists in the wake of political repression post-2020. By applying the theories of political opportunity structure (Tilly 1978) and resource mobilization, we can explore the interplay between the external political constraints and internal organizational strategies, while also questioning the broader implications of these adaptations. Tilly's (1978) theory of political opportunity structure provides a framework to understand how the external political environment shapes social movements. The 2020 crackdown by the Lukashenka regime is an example of a closed political system where state apparatuses actively dismantle civil society. However, the adaptation of these NGOs to operate from abroad raises questions about the sustainability of their impact. While relocation to more liberal political climates allows these organizations to escape immediate repression, it also poses the risk of detachment from the local context in Belarus. Can activism from exile truly influence change within a country still under authoritarian rule? The loss of direct contact with local stakeholders and the potential dilution of localized knowledge undermines the effectiveness of these organizations in addressing the specific needs of their original communities. The digital adaptation, while innovative, also presents critical challenges. The shift to online platforms for secure communication and coordination highlights the necessity of bypassing physical restrictions, yet it also exposes organizations to new vulnerabilities, such as cybersecurity threats.

Resource mobilization theory (Tilly 1978) emphasizes the strategic acquisition and use of resources. The diversification of resource mobilization strategies by Belarusian NGOs, including decentralized financial

transactions, illustrates their resourcefulness. However, this diversification also points to a potential over-reliance on external funding sources, which may not be sustainable in the long term. A critical perspective questions the extent to which these NGOs can maintain their independence and grassroots nature when heavily dependent on international funding and support. There is a risk that the agendas of external donors might overshadow local priorities, leading to a disconnect between the NGOs' activities and the actual needs of the Belarusian populace under repression. Additionally, the necessity to continuously update technological and security skills diverts valuable resources and attention away from core mission activities, potentially leading to mission drift. The transnational exchange of ideas and practices facilitated by the dispersion of NGO members is both a strength and a potential weakness. While it enriches the organizations' cultural capital and adaptability, it also creates a fragmented organizational structure. The cohesion and unified strategy of the movement might be compromised as members operate across diverse geopolitical contexts with varying priorities and challenges.

Finally, the interplay between political opportunities and resource mobilization is crucial in understanding the resilience of Belarusian NGOs. The closure of political opportunities necessitated innovative resource mobilization strategies, demonstrating a dynamic relationship between external political constraints and internal organizational capabilities. However, this dynamic relationship is fraught with tensions and contradictions. A critical analysis must question whether the strategies adopted are genuinely sustainable and effective in the long term. The NGOs' ability to adapt and leverage resources underscores the importance of flexibility and innovation, but it also raises concerns about the potential for burnout and the erosion of grassroots connections. The sustainability and resilience achieved through international support and digital adaptation highlight the potential and limitations of these approaches. The broader implications of these adaptations suggest that while some Belarusian urban development NGOs have managed to survive and continue their activism, the fundamental challenge of operating under a repressive regime remains unresolved. The reliance on external environments and digital spaces may offer temporary reprieve but does not address the need for systemic change within Belarus.

The findings from this study, viewed through the lenses of political opportunity structure and resource mobilization theories, provide a comprehensive yet complex understanding of the challenges and strategies of Belarusian NGOs. The critical examination of these strategies reveals both their potential and limitations, highlighting the need for continuous adaptation and reflection on the broader implications of their activism in an increasingly repressive political landscape.

Conclusion

The severe repression and liquidation of NGOs in Belarus post-2020 represent a significant closure of political opportunities. The regime's crackdown on civil society illustrates a highly restrictive political environment where traditional channels of activism and influence are blocked. The disruption of contacts with public officials and the forced relocation of activists indicates a closed political system with little tolerance for dissent. The relocation and adaptation of Belarusian NGOs to operate from abroad show how activists respond to changes in political opportunities. By moving to more open political environments, these organizations continue their activities under transnational repression. The use of digital spaces and secure communication tools became an adaptation strategy, allowing activists to bypass physical restrictions imposed by the regime. The shift to digital platforms and the use of decentralized transactions have diversified their mobilization possibilities to gather financial and human resources from a broader base.

In exile, Belarusian NGOs are searching for new elite allies in host countries and through their international networks. They provide support, resources, and legitimacy to their cause, which was previously unavailable in Belarus thus bringing new opportunities for survival and further development. Maintaining and expanding social networks abroad is crucial for resource mobilization. The transnational exchange of

ideas and practices became an important part of the strategy in sustaining and advancing activism using support from international allies in the broader global context. It enriches the cultural and intellectual capital of these NGOs, enhancing their ability to mobilize support and resources.

The ability of NGOs to adapt their organizational structures and methods of (co)operation, including digital adaptation and internationalizing their activities, demonstrates organizational resilience and flexibility in resource mobilization in restricted opportunities caused by repression. The continuous updating of technological and security skills is an investment in human capital of NGOs, necessary to navigate the increased digital activities and associated security concerns when activists remain visible targets of repressive regimes.

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