

## **Civil society – long traditions, lack of strategy?**

In Western Europe civil society groups shape the relations between the state and the society. Strong non-governmental organizations may exert impact on the state's policy. By harnessing the work of volunteers and promoting social activity, they solve social problems without the state's participation, express the interests of various groups in a pluralistic spirit, while respecting the rights of minorities and protect the public interest wherever state authority might prove ineffective, or where abuse of authority is likely to take place.

The stronger the civil society, the better founded the rule of law. However, in order for a strong civil society to bloom, the state must observe the right of free association.

In post-socialist states the civil society was developing under peculiar conditions, as the societies of those states were subject to totalitarian control by the communist regime.

The case of Belarus is unique, even when compared to the neighboring countries. Its specific character is proved by the low level of national identity caused by severely underdeveloped nation-shaping processes. The authoritarian state remains, until this day, the main architect of the Belarusian national project.

The alternative projects, such as those based on liberal-democratic or language-ethnic approaches, have been marginalized by the concept of constructing a nation based on strong state authority. The very existence of those various competitive concepts of the nation is an additional factor contributing to the complex character of relations between the authorities and civil society.

### **Guarantee the freedom of association**

Developments concerning Belarus' internal situation depend today, to an ever greater extent, on outside factors. The geo-political situation may help normalize the relations between the Belarusian state and the society, thus directing Belarus to the path of democratization.

The first step is to create the conditions required for development of the civil society. Such conditions will not exist as long as the freedom of association is not observed in Belarus, just as it is in EU member states. The problem of Belarus' pursuit of such standards continues to be the subject of dialogue between Belarus and Europe. In the document entitled "What can

the EU offer to Belarus”, dated November 2006, the European Union proposed to normalize the status of non-governmental organizations in Belarus.

The freedom of association is currently observed in Belarus to an extent similar to that known from Central Asia’s dictatorship states, which is directly linked to the weakness of the civil society.

### **Sovietization interrupts development of the civil society**

Nevertheless, civil society has long-lasting traditions in Belarus. It was first shaped by political clubs, owners’ associations, consumer co-operatives, peasant associations and other self-support institutions established as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Institutional growth of those structures observed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was similar to that seen in other European countries. There were 20-30 non-governmental organizations existing at that time in western Belarus and serving as an important component of the social and political life.

The natural process of civil society development was stopped by the introduction of Soviet authority, first in the eastern part of Belarus, and after 1939 also in the western regions of the country. Social organizations did not have the status of non-governmental organizations in the Soviet Union, but served as a tool for exerting political control over the masses. No elements of the pre-Soviet civil society have survived in Belarus. The successors of state-controlled, Soviet organizations associating youths, veterans, trade unions or entrepreneurs still play a crucial role.

### **The flourishing of early 1990s**

But despite all that, there is an independent civil society existing in Belarus. The first organizations began to appear in the final stages of USSR’s existence, in the 1980s, when underground, and then legal structures were created that constituted an alternative for state-controlled organizations.

After Belarus regained its independence, the number of such organizations began to skyrocket. Their number amounted to 24 in 1990, but a year later, in 1995, as many as 1,000 of them were registered. If there were two organizations existing in one town at the beginning of the 1990s, e.g. a branch of the Belarusian National Front and the Belarusian Language

Association, three years later the same town had a dozen of organizations dealing with environmental issues, youth-related issues, social problems or the local history. An important role was played by associations concerned with problems related to the Chernobyl disaster.

With the lapse of time those organizations were becoming politically uninvolved. They specialized in their narrow areas of interest and adopted the classic model of a pluralistic civil society. This was largely facilitated by the relatively democratic atmosphere in the society and in the state itself.

### **NGOs against authoritarian rule**

As the authoritarian rule was gaining in strength, non-governmental organizations were finding it ever more difficult to function in line with the civil model. The situation in the country forced the NGOs to assume a specific political stance and to become involved in counteracting the authoritarian regime.

In the meantime, the number of non-governmental organizations concerned with promoting democratic reform was growing. It was their aim to bring Belarus back on the path of democratization. The NGOs were becoming ever more effective and highly specialized. On April 1, 1998 their number equaled 2,191. The number of civil initiatives was growing as well, as they required no state registration in order to function legally.

Non-governmental organizations promoting democracy, free market and human rights were at first establishing cooperation with political parties, to eventually become political actors themselves. They created the National Association of Belarus Democratic Non-governmental Organizations and the Belarus Association of Resource Centers.

### **Authorities wage war on NGOs**

It was not to the liking of the authoritarian regime that the civil sector had taken a concrete, political shape. In 1999 the authorities allowed for re-registration of only 1,326 non-governmental organizations. Many well-known and respected entities were deprived of their legal status. First attempts were also made to limit NGO's ability to take advantage of the support provided by foreign donors.

Initially, the state was not too radical in combating the non-governmental sector. The organizations were functioning relatively freely and the state authorities were complying with the law while contacting them. Even the un-registered civil initiatives were not faced with serious problems, although formal regulations were in place at that time that in practice forbade them to operate legally.

It was not until 2003 that the campaign of eliminating independent non-governmental organizations was launched. It became virtually impossible to register a new organization. The president's decrees limited the ability to acquire funding even more. A new legal base was created for establishing the so-called state-run civil associations. Activists of un-registered initiatives had to face administrative repression.

The war on civil society waged by the authorities was at its peak when changes to the penal code were effected. An article was introduced in 2006 according to which participation in illegal associations was penalized with two years' imprisonment. 17 persons were arrested based on that article between 2006 and 2009, and dozens more received official warnings.

### **Hope lies in cooperation with the EU**

Today, the Belarusian society is very much unstable. Some of the non-governmental organizations have maintained their political character, while others, although threatened by repression, have managed to stay out of politics. Some of them function illegally or under the auspices of other entities. Social activity is still threatened by penal action. The activists face repression and are discriminated against. Local, grass-roots initiatives stand no chance of transforming into full-right non-governmental organizations.

Such a semi-legal manner of functioning has resulted in the creation of a "democratic ghetto", in which non-governmental organizations have been isolated from the society. Only a sensible strategy for the development of a civil society could break this isolation. Belarus' participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership Program is a great opportunity, as it assumes active participation of the civil society.

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