

Political Participation at the Local Level

by Tatyana Vodolazhskaya and Andrey Yegorov

The society of Belarus was under the influence of the Soviet regime for 70 years, the consequences of which can be seen to this date – in political and social culture, in how institutions and social structures are organized, and in the way governance is exercised and power is enforced. Without awareness of this heritage it is impossible to understand how local communities function or how citizens participate in the decision-making process.

The Soviet regime was dismantling local communities as a subject of social and political life, seeking to replace them with party organization units and production collectives. This goal was pursued by subduing local *soviets* to party administration, by top-down nomination of local managers, and by organizing all spheres of community life (housing, education, leisure and work).

As a result, local representatives of central administration or workers' organizations and trade unions came to cater for all needs and interests of the people. No locally-organized society associations had any legal or social mechanisms at their disposal to manage their community life. (A detailed account of the mechanisms whereby communities were being destroyed in Belarus can be found in W. Mackiewicz, T. Vodolazhskaya in, "Powstanie i rozwój wspólnot", 2007).

The present political system in Belarus has been deliberately and consistently reproducing the structure and main principles of organization of social relations, characteristic of the Soviet era.

Local Communities: The State of Non-existence

Local communities in present-day Belarus can be distinguished only on the basis of formal criteria, by including the people living in a certain area. Local communities as genuine social subjects are non-existent in Belarus. There are no legal and political conditions (see the analysis of local government below), cultural traditions, or experience to enable them to build such type of structures.

This is why, in Belarusian conditions one should focus on the activity of certain entities and study the mechanisms of how the interests of local people are considered in the decision-making process, rather than to contemplate on the activities of local communities.

Activities at the local level take the following forms:

- Activities of individuals and small groups (mostly informal ones). These are groups of people fascinated by some specific area (culture, sports, history). Their interests and activity are restricted to a narrow range of topics and usually do not reach the town or municipality level at all. Such individuals or groups are deliberately avoiding contacts with government authorities or social/political organizations.

- Activities of regional representations of nation-wide parties or associations, and local organizations. These groups associate virtually all politically and socially active people in the region. Often the same people represent several associations and parties in their region at the same time. The activity of such associations has much eroded in recent years and is limited mainly to a struggle for survival. They do not have any substantial influence on important local decision-making.

- Activities of Government-operated non-governmental organizations (GoNGO), such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, social councils, veterans' associations, Belaya Rus, trade unions, etc. Their activities are directly linked to those of local executive authorities. They play the role of co-instigators or managers of the latter's different actions and projects. They do not have their autonomous policies or interests. Membership of these structures, although mandatory for most workers or students of government institutions, is purely formal.

Some of these entities claim that they represent the interests of the local population, but in practice they do not have any scope for influencing the decision-making process. All decisions concerning people's lives are taken in the vertical structure of Government administration, which may take into account the interests of local people in three ways.

1. The interests and needs of local people are assumed to fit into the national development vision created by the central authorities. These supposed interests are taken into account in regional development programmes being developed in a hierarchical system: the State – province – district – municipality.

2. Sometimes the heads of local authorities are personally trying to persuade those higher in the authority rank to take account of the needs of the local population in specific administrative decisions. Such mechanism functions well until the authority is held by a specific "benevolent" official.

3. Lobbying for group interests is effected through a clan system. There are towns and regions where informal communities function, which include heads of major local institutions and enterprises related to each other by family affinities. Such communities often use a variety of informal ways of influence. While promoting their personal interests, they also provide investments important for the development of the region.

In specific cases, consolidated groups of local people are able to influence decisions. About half of the population in the largest village in Belarus (Olshany) are Protestants pursuing mainly agricultural activities (cultivation and sale of cucumbers). They manage to strike compromises with the local authorities who take decisions advantageous to them. (For example, at their request, a petrol station was built in their village). But these are isolated, if not peculiar, cases and there are few municipalities where you can see similar events.

A separate class that should be considered includes attempts to create social councils as part of the implementation of sustainable development and "Local Agenda 21" (at Dzisna, Lepel, Dzerzhynsk, Fanipol, Turaw, and other towns). These councils are meant to form a base for the development of local communities. They comprise representatives of the government, associations and socially active citizens. However, although this program is already ten years on, it has failed to substantially increase the impact of local people on decision-making. The "local agencies" that are already functioning do not have comparable status with the government programmes of regional development and are not included in these programs.

Local Government: Declarations vs Policy Practice

In Belarus, local government does not exist. Although formally there is a law "on local authorities and local government", there are only local councils. The 4 April 2010 revision of the Act on Local Government neither formally, nor practically complies with the basic provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Under the Belarusian law, "the local government of the Republic of Belarus is part of the national authorities, which means the replacement of local government by the state" (A note of the Lew Sapieha Foundation "About the draft law on local government and local authorities in the Republic of Belarus", <http://sapieha.org/news>).

A centralized system of vertically organized government authorities means that local councils are not independent, and report to higher-ranking state authorities. They operate primarily in the interest of the government and not of the local people. The powers of the councils are so small that they can not effectively address local problems. Their autonomy is further restricted by the lack financial resources. (They do not have their own bank accounts, can not own property, etc.). The last amendment to the Law "on local authorities and local government" provides for the possibility of creating associations of local councils. This type of structure is supposed to represent collective interests and could provide councils with more autonomy, if only by giving them the opportunity to have bank accounts. However, since

Belarusian authorities brutally restrict the activities of any social structures, they cannot be expected to undertake meaningful efforts to expand the powers of local councils.

The characteristics of the electoral system and the fact that the deputies of these councils are selected by local and central government officials widen the gap between "self-government" authorities and the population. If the practice is that local-council deputies are not elected by the citizens, then the councils are not true representative bodies. People did not have the means to affect their activity. The real authority in the field is exercised only by local executive committees (the so-called *ispolkoms*).

In such a system, there are mostly informal ways of influencing the local authorities. Local interest groups and clans control the staffing of positions and influence the people who occupy those positions. In some cases, such groups treat the positions of members of local councils as an additional channel of access to Government. The local councils comprise mostly managers of large enterprises and government agencies, heads of public administration, etc. In Soviet times, this group was called the party and economic cadre. The number of representatives of political parties (including pro-government ones) in local councils in the years 1999-2007 did not exceed 5.2 percent, and in 2007 it fell below 2 percent. (A. Kazakiewicz, "Tendencje wśród elit regionalnych Białorusi", *Палітычная сфера* №9, 2007).

There are no real mechanisms for citizens to solve their local problems, which depoliticizes the local community. Single social and political activists are, at best, regarded as freaks, and are usually completely marginalized. This leads to frustration, as a result of which even the most active people lose hope for change and focus on their daily problems.

Political activity of the major part of the society is limited to the traditional (and not particularly large-scale) visits at polling stations and participation in folk festivities organized by the government authorities. Group of activists and representatives of the few independent media activate only during the next election. They lead protest actions (Day of the Will, Chernobyl Path, 1 May, etc.). In large cities, the opposition has some potential, but in the municipal centers and small towns it is represented by isolated or small groups of activists. When there is no particular occasion, political life dies out completely.

2010 Local Elections

Preparations for the election campaign for local councils have provided some hopes of democratizing the electoral process. Consultations with international organizations which were expected to bring the Belarusian legislation closer to international standards have resulted in amendments to the electoral law adopted in December 2009. They addressed, *inter alia*, the appointment of election commissions, the conditions for campaigning,

appointing candidates by political parties, and facilitating individual candidates' access to the media. However, the new rules were not extensive enough to radically change the existing electoral system. Provisions that were expected to provide equal opportunities to all candidates have not introduced the real mechanisms and guarantees of that equality. Control over the counting of votes and election monitoring facilitates mass fraud by the authorities. (The critique and detailed analysis of the electoral law can be found in the text by Sergei Alfer "Belarusian electoral legislation: The test for compliance to the standards" http://belinstitute.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=619:2010-03-18-06-43-07&catid=11:politics&Itemid=28&lang=ru).

The democratization of the electoral system depends not so much on the legislation, as on its practical application. Over the previous years, a tradition has developed of organizing elections in which to comply with senior-authority instructions was more important than to comply with the letter of the law. Electoral commissions and the media are controlled by the executive. Only people loyal to the government are appointed to sit on election commissions. In the event of a conflict, there is no option to recourse to an independent court.

All these problems came to be felt during the last campaign and elections to local councils on 25 April 2010. Election commissions included only 76 representatives of opposition political parties out of more than 600 of those proposed (the website of the United Democratic Forces reported that there were exactly 912 of them http://udf.by/news_ads/29115-kolichestvo-oppozicionerov-v-uchastkovyx.html). The candidates who managed to register and began campaigning, complained that there were attempts to intimidate them, they were threatened with dismissal from work, hindered in collecting signatures and in campaigning. There have been reports of placing completed ballot papers into ballot boxes and a massive vote ahead of time (as much as 29.3% of voters voted in this way), during which manipulations were most frequent.

These facts not only demonstrate that the electoral system has not been liberalized, but also the weakness of democratic forces on the local level. A total of only 240 candidates of democratic parties have been registered (i.e., less than 1% out of 25,033 candidates), although refusals to register was relatively rare. This shows that the mobilization potential of opposition political parties is negligible (there were 6387 election commissions with 68,881 members). Even if opposition parties were allowed to register all 912 committee members proposed by them, they would constitute only 1.42% of members. The activity of other local communities not connected with the government was not much impressive, either.

The counting of votes and announcement of election results brought no surprises. The seats were given to only six representatives of democratic forces – one seat for Hromada and 5

seats for the Belarusian United Left Party "Fair World" (According to the Central Election Commission, "Fair World" got two seats <http://www.rec.gov.by/pdf/msd2010/form26-53.pdf>). None of the candidates of the Belarusian National Front or the "For Freedom" movement won any mandate. Independent organizations who monitored the elections reported that the removal of certain stringent requirements for notification and registration of candidates has moved the Belarusian electoral system a bit closer to democratic standards. However, they stated that: "lack of transparent procedures for reviewing the documents relating to the registration of candidates allows commissions to discriminate some of them." They also stated that elections were held "in a similar atmosphere as the previous ones" and "no significant change towards democratization of the electoral process has been observed" (Human Rights Center "Viasna", <http://spring96.org/be/news/33885/>).

To sum up, the real election campaign has not confirmed the hopes sparked by the previous amendments to the electoral law. Democratic procedures failed to take root on the local level. Elections were organized according to old practices. Total control over their course was exercised by government administration.

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