

(De)-consolidation of civil society in Belarus: decreased potential for solidarity action, de-politicisation, disagreements about values

The projects to consolidate civil society actors are part of the history of the civil society formation in Belarus. It is necessary to analyse these processes in order to understand their place in the system of civil society, assess the effectiveness of their operation, set strategic goals and identify factors, which facilitate or, on the contrary, hinder their achievement.

Types of consolidation initiatives

In terms of the outreach, one should distinguish between the general and sectoral consolidation projects. One can also disaggregate the initiatives with a larger or lesser degree of institutionalisation, ranging from mass public movements to umbrella networks with a well-developed far-reaching structure and bureaucratic apparatus.

The association of ecological organisations “Green Network”, the coalition projects of human rights organisations (Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections – a joint campaign by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and Human Rights Centre “Viasna” (2010), the Belarusian Human Rights Forum), etc. can be described as examples of sectoral consolidation initiatives. Sectorial associations distinguish themselves by uniting the organisations, which share a common goal and common interests. This shared interest in collaboration allows coalitions to function despite even the lowest level of institutionalisation.

Over the past 15–20 years, one can single out four major ‘overall’ consolidation projects, namely: Belarusian Association of Resource Centres, Assembly of NGOs, Movement for Freedom, and the National Platform of Eastern Partnership’s Civil Society Forum.

Preconditions for civil society consolidation projects in Belarus began to take shape in the second half of the 1990s, the period of strengthening authoritarianism and pressure by the authorities. On the other hand, third-sector activists assessed enthusiastically the potential of their influence on society and believed in imminent democratic changes.

Emerged in 1998, the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres (BARC) united regional resource centres.¹

BARC's application for official registration was rejected in 2001. Nevertheless, by 2003, it had united over 60 public associations across Belarus. The second attempt to register was in 2003 and was not successful, either. Fines and confiscation of property were common for resource centres in the Belarusian regions. BARC member organisations faced increased pressure in the periods of electoral campaigns – the presidential elections in 2001, the referendum in 2004. Pushed out of legal status, BARC eventually ceased operations.

The Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs was founded in 1997.² Initially, one of the Assembly's service functions was to assist non-governmental organisations with official registration. Ironically, the Ministry of Justice officials would even advise the organisations seeking registration to approach the Assembly for assistance.

In 2001, the year of presidential elections, the Assembly launched the *Vybiray!* Campaign (in Belarusian and Russian alike, it means both Elect! and Choose!), in which nearly 200 NGOs participated. The campaign was organised separately from the political agitation campaign, aiming to increase electoral participation. The three tasks of the campaign were:

To deliver objective information about the situation, before the election and the general situation in the country, to the target groups by using various media; to create an optimistic message and confidence in, the possibility of changes for the better, which challenged how to cope with the fear of repression, being in a minority, and disbelief in change; a call to

¹ In the 2000s, the list of key resource centres in the regions included: Hrodna Regional Public Association “Ratusha” (Town Hall), Homel Regional Public Association “Civic Initiatives”, Agency of Regional Development “Varuta” (Baranavichy), Brest Regional Centre for Civic Society “Vezha” and others.

- ☞ The resource centres performed the following functions, among others:
- ☞ Providing physical infrastructure and facilities (houses were built for many of them);
- ☞ Providing computer and printing equipment;
- ☞ Offering legal support, including assistance with registration;
- ☞ Assisting with fund-raising;
- ☞ Providing a platform for inter-organisational collaboration;
- ☞ Institutional development.

² The Assembly was established with the objective of implementing the following activities:

- ☞ Promoting the interests of NGOs in Belarus through solidary actions;
- ☞ Assisting in improving the work of NGOs;
- ☞ Supporting communication between member organisations;
- ☞ Providing information to and about member organisations;
- ☞ Supporting and developing initiative groups;
- ☞ Monitoring, analysis and evaluation of conditions of civil society and legal conditions.

*come to vote on the last day of election – 9 September – (instead of early voting) in order to minimise the opportunities for rigging the election.*³

The Assembly ran civil campaigns “Let’s do better” (2002–2003), “Our Solidarity” (2003–2005), “For Freedom” (2005–2007). In the period of 1999–2012, the Assembly held seven congresses. Since 2009, it has organised annually, the Civil Society Champions award ceremonies. The Assembly also runs initiatives dealing with the change of the legal framework for the operation of non-commercial organisations.

The Assembly was denied registration three times. The lack of clear priorities and common goals of member organisations determined the crisis of self-identification of this structure. Beginning from the mid-2000s, the Assembly’s significance for member organisations deteriorated but it preserved its bureaucratic structure. The Assembly lost its consolidating potential, despite keeping the administration apparatus and membership of nearly 300 NGOs.

The Movement for Freedom can be considered as an example of a consolidation project. The brand “For Freedom” was created during the large-scale campaign of the Assembly of NGOs, aimed at “encouraging more active political participation of people who seek change via promotion of freedom as a fundamental value.”⁴ Later the “For Freedom” slogan “became very popular and was picked up by the political forces,”⁵ thus creating the “For Freedom” movement. The movement was founded on the wave of protests against the rigging of the presidential election results in 2006, and in December 2008 registered as a human rights and education public.⁶ Later the movement moved closer to the political party and participated in the political campaign; this decreased its consolidating potential for civil society.

The Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is one of the biggest projects set up recently. The, inaugurated by the European Union in 2009, Eastern Partnership policy envisages creating, in participating countries, Civil Society Forums. In Belarus, the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum was established in July 2010. At the beginning, it was not considered an independent actor with a centralised decision-making structure. Some participants of the Platform (first of all, representatives of EuroBelarus consortium) advocated for the expansion of functions and goals of that union beyond the borders of the Eastern Partnership. That would allow using the Platform’s potential for the consolidation of civil society and democratic reforms.

³ “Vybiray” campaign led by Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs starts in Belarus // http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2001/07/06/ic_news_623_348511/ 06 July 2007.

⁴ Webpage of NGO Assembly. “About us” // http://belngo.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/leaflet_output.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Movement ‘For Freedom’” official webpage // <http://pyx.by/rus/dvizhenie>.

Due to the aggravation of contradictions regarding the vision of the future of the National Platform, several organisations left the project.

The National Platform did not contribute to the consolidation of civil society and did not apply the potential of its actors for the joint realisation of specific programmes. Its goals appeared to be too general for specific NGOs. No working groups have been created that could involve relevant NGOs into projects that would focus on reforms in the social sphere.

Barriers to consolidation

Starting from the middle of the 1990s, Belarusian authorities increasingly suppressed civil society due to its focus on political participation and democratic reforms. Presidential Decree No 2 of 26 January 1999 On Some Measures for Regulation of Activities of Political Parties, Trade Unions, and Other Public Associations stiffened conditions for the registration of NGOs and induced all registered NGOs (public associations) to re-register. The European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) in its Opinion stated the following:

The number of Belarusian NGOs losing their official registrations has since the introduction of the above mentioned Presidential Decree, dramatically risen, and new organisations have had difficulties getting registered. HRC “Viasna”, the biggest human rights group in Belarus, was closed down by the authorities in 2003 along with other human rights organisations. The unregistered NGOs have had difficulties to register for reportedly ungrounded reasons, even against the opinion of international organisations in which Belarus holds membership.⁷

In December 2005, just before the presidential election that took place in March 2006, the Criminal Code of Belarus was amended with Article 193-1 criminalising the conduct of non-registered NGOs and envisaging punishment by a fine or imprisonment for up to two years for participation in the activities of non-registered political parties, other public associations, religious organizations or funds. Although the prosecution under that article was rather rarely applied to activists, Article 193-1 became an essential mechanism of pressure on civil society and the democratic community as a whole.

An additional barrier for legal activities of NGOs is state control of donor funding introduced by the Presidential Edict No 404 of 24 July 1997. The Edict, On Establishment

⁷ European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission). Opinion On Compatibility with Universal Human Rights Standards of Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code on the Rights of Non-Registered Associations // [www.belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/Belarus%20Venice%20Commission%20Article%20193-1%20RUS_\(1\)\(1\).pdf](http://www.belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/Belarus%20Venice%20Commission%20Article%20193-1%20RUS_(1)(1).pdf).

of Department on Humanitarian Aid under the President of the Republic of Belarus, created a special institution responsible for

*developing a unified system of registration and distribution of humanitarian and other charitable assistance, creation of a centralised database of state, public and religious organisations, funds (including foreign organisations) and physical persons providing charitable assistance, including those who implement children's health improvement programmes.*⁸

Aside from the pressure from the authorities, a significant barrier for consolidation is the low level of civic consciousness. Authors of “Civicus Index” name the following obstacles to the development and consolidation of civil society:

- weak national consciousness;
- an underdeveloped private sector;
- the absence of a middle class;
- mass apathetic attitudes towards public issues.⁹

At the beginning of the 2000s, third sector representatives were not satisfied with the evaluation of their activities by the society. The “Civicus index” survey evaluated the perceptions of the third sector in the business environment. 38% of NGO leaders stated that businessmen did not support the participation of their hired workers in the NGO activities; 25% said that entrepreneurs were not involved in charitable support to the third sector organisations. The main reasons for that, according to NGO leaders, were the absence of favourable tax legislation and lack of charity traditions. Distrust of businessmen and authorities to the third sector was strengthened by the fact that some NGOs did not have fully transparent sources of funding.

According to a 2005 survey of perception in the society of NGOs the issue of NGOs was not in the focus of public attention:

The majority of people do not know about NGOs, are not involved in their activities and do not want to know more about them. One can say that the issue of NGOs in Belarus does not interest or engage Belarusians who just do not think about it. This attitude is supported by the ambiguous function of the state public associations (GoNGOs), identification of NGO activities as political activities, overall passiveness and the atomised nature of the

⁸ Presidential Edict No 404 of 24 July 1997. The Edict On Establishment of Department on Humanitarian Aid under the President of the Republic of Belarus // <http://pravo.newsby.org/belarus/ukaz4/uk133.htm>.

⁹ Zagoumenov Y. *Belarus Civil Society: In Need of a Dialogue. A preliminary report on the Civicus Index on civil society project in Belarus* // <http://www.civicus.org/new/media/belarus.pdf>.

Belarusian population, its lack of involvement in the NGO activities as well as by overall unpopularity of joint action with the goal of solving social problems.¹⁰

A 2010 survey brought similar results:

Perception of the non-governmental sector's functions, citizens' involvement in civic activities and the position of the state has changed insignificantly: citizens prefer to stay uninvolved in the activities of NGOs, despite evaluating such activities slightly more positively than before.¹¹

A separate group of barriers for the successful consolidation of NGOs is the group of values and attitudes inside the NGO sector. According to the “Civicus Index”, the level of trust and tolerance among civil society representatives differs only slightly from the level of trust and tolerance of those who are not NGO members. 27% of CSO activists shared the opinion that people can be trusted while among non-members 24% shared that view. The aggregate index of tolerance (aggregate indicator of tolerance to people of another race, faith, country of origin or sexual orientation) among civil society representatives was not higher than among average Belarusians: 3.3 points out of 5. The authors of the report come to a pessimistic conclusion. According to them the low level of trust in civil society reflects the low level of social capital in that community, which prevents the level of tolerance and trust from growth.¹²

Another negative factor is that work in the third sector has become less prestigious than before. While the income of the population grew, wages of NGO workers often lagged behind.

¹⁰ Chavusau Yu. *Hramadskiya abyadnanni: ikh rola u suchasnym belaruskim hramadstve. Analitichnaya zapiska pa vynikakh dasledvannia. // NGOs: their role in contemporary Belarusian society. Anaoytical note based on the results of the research.* Minsk, 2005. P. 3.

¹¹ *Obshchestvennye ob'edineniya: ikh rol' v sovremennom belorusskom obshchestve: Analiticheskaya zapiska po rezul'tatam issledovaniya // NGOs: their role in contemporary Belarusian society. Anaoytical note based on the results of the research. // Minsk 2010. // <http://3sektar.by/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/NGO-2010.pdf>.*

¹² Zagoumenov Y. *Belarus Civil Society: In Need of a Dialogue. A preliminary report on the civicus Index on civil society project in Belarus // <http://www.civicus.org/new/media/belarus.pdf>* In the 2000s, the majority of respondents from the third sector mentioned the authoritarian style of NGO management, while 67% stated that free discussion was not taking place in their organisations.

Conclusions

Research on potential for solidarity in the organised Belarusian civil society by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) and the Centre for European Transformation¹³ shows that currently the potential for solidarity that could serve as a factor of successful consolidation is limited. The research has shown that the third sector representatives are not unconditional bearers of global values, beliefs or action orientations that would lead to democratic change in Belarus. The “third sector” is not some special place in the Belarusian society that would gather people who are united in their views and beliefs and have the same goals in political and social life. Social beliefs of its representatives do not fit in the same value framework, while the “third sector” itself is not a “self-evident source of democratic transformation in Belarus.”¹⁴ According to the authors of the document, there is no unity and common opinion in the third sector in Belarus regarding basic principles and values; that unity could provide the potential for consolidation.

Analysis of the potential for solidarity has also proven that one should not expect that NGOs will form a social basis for solidary actions:

*There is no ground for an expectation that NGOs can form a basis for the mass solidarity that, in turn, could become the basis for political and social transformations. One can expect only partial involvement, taking into account that it will be closely related to topics and content of actions that demand support and will involve only a certain part of this or that social group.*¹⁵

Thus, the very fact of an affiliation with the third sector does not automatically create the ability to act in a solidary way.

Authors of the research come to the conclusion that NGOs are losing their transformational potential and, to the contrary, are becoming a stabilising factor for the existing social system:

¹³ Vodolazhskaya T., Shelest O., Egorov A., Artemenko E. *Issledovanie potentsiala solidarnosti v belarusskom organizovannom grazhdanskom obshchestve. Otchet po rezul'tatam issledovaniya // Research on potential for solidarity in the organised Belarusian civil society // http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014_Solidarity_NGOs_Belarus.pdf.*

¹⁴ Vodolazhskaya T., Shelest O., Egorov A., Artemenko E. *Issledovanie potentsiala solidarnosti v belarusskom organizovannom grazhdanskom obshchestve. Otchet po rezul'tatam issledovaniya // Research on potential for solidarity in the organised Belarusian civil society // http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014_Solidarity_NGOs_Belarus.pdf.*

¹⁵ Ibid.

Change in function of the organised civil society is not a purely local, Belarusian phenomenon. The high professionalisation of that sector, its integration into the overall system of the society has become a general trend and strategy of the development of European civil society. NGOs increasingly support the sustainability of the system in which they operate and decreasingly serve as a factor of transformation.¹⁶

Civil society in Belarus does not have among its goals participation in a democratic transition or political struggle. In this case, the low level of consolidation or potential for solidarity is a mere reflection of the overall condition of civil society.

If we were to view civil society as a source of democratic transformation and evaluate the potential of its participation in the political processes, we would not be able to name any of the projects of consolidation of civil society that exist now or existed in the past as a successful one. Moreover, as a result of the evolution of the civic sector, its potential for solidary, consolidated action decreases.

¹⁶ Ibid.