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Civil Society and young people in Belarus: A force for political change or ‘silent majority’?

Options for EU Policy

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The recent social uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have underlined the importance of youth and their access and use of the internet and social media in pushing for political change under conditions of authoritarian or autocratic rule. Contrary to the expectations of many, civil society in the MENA region turned from a ‘silent majority’ to a powerful force for change. The ‘rediscovery’ of the role of civil society in paving the way for political change in the MENA naturally demands a fresh look at the development of civil society in other authoritarian regimes within proximity of the European Union (EU). The unprecedented scale of public protest which swept across Belarus’ capital city Minsk following the rigged presidential elections in December 2010, and the severe economic crisis which hit the country in the first half of 2011, raise doubts about the durability of the Lukashenka presidency. Yet, civil society in Belarus is often described as apolitical and passive, with few potential for a political uprising against the regime.

*This policy brief provides an overview of past and recent developments in Belarusian civil society, with a particular focus on the role of young people and their use of the internet and social media. We argue that the new media have clearly supported the civic activities of young people in Belarus, but that divisions among pro-European and 'other' civil society in the country, as well as generational cleavages, effectively prevent the formation of an organised civil society capable of pushing for political change. Instead of directly (or indirectly) reinforcing these divisions, Western donors and the EU should target **all types** of civil society and further facilitate the participation of youth in its assistance and aid programs.*

Civil Society in Belarus: The EU's Eastern Partnership and the 2010 presidential elections

In January 2011, the Belarusian Ministry of Justice recorded 2325 registered public associations. The vast majority of these organisations are, however, state controlled. Independent civil society faces serious obstacles to organise in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Although the regime's pressure on independent NGOs somewhat decreased in the year proceeding the presidential elections in December 2010, the actual opportunities and freedom of manoeuvre of NGOs critical of the regime did not change fundamentally. The Belarusian authorities took, for example, several repressive measures against the Speak the Truth Campaign, the Union of Poles in Belarus, as well as the Union of Belarusian Writers. In the course of 2010, the Speak the Truth Campaign constituted a particular problem for the regime as it gained widespread support from the population on local actions (e.g. unemployment or local infrastructure improvements). Local officials are also reported to have taken a friendly attitude to the actions of the Speak the Truth Campaign.¹ From March 2010, the authorities began to confiscate documents, PCs and even private savings from Speak the Truth campaigners, and searched the group's offices and private apartments.

The Lukashenka regime also began to tighten the control over no-profit organisations in Belarus well before the presidential elections. In early 2010, President Lukashenka ordered the government to draft a bill which would give the governmental agencies more control

¹ Fedotova, I. and Belovsky, V. (2010) 'Civil Society: Hyperactivity with a view on future performance', in: Belarusian Yearbook 2010, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, p. 144.

over the activities of NGOs. The bill was heavily opposed by NGOs, which gathered signatures in the name of over 270.000 people. The action was described as an 'unequaled case of joint efforts to promote interests of Belarusian NGOs'.²

Furthermore, independent civil society organisations did also, for the first time in the history of the Lukashenka regime, start to coordinate and form a common 'national platform' for the Civil Society Forum of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP was launched in May 2009 and aims to enhance the EU's relations with Eastern Europe, including the South Caucasus. The EaP comprises bilateral and regional cooperation, mainly at the level of governments and senior government officials and experts. The purpose of the Civil Society Forum (CSF) of the EaP was an attempt to integrate civil society into the relations with the EU and its Eastern Partners. However, after two years of its existence, the actual powers and influence of the CSF remain limited, or, in the words of an NGO representative, the CSF is regarded as the 'kindergarden' by the government officials in the regional thematic platforms of the EaP. Belarusian NGOs involved in the CSF do nevertheless see indirect benefits of the platform because it encourages coordination among Belarusian civil society. In parallel to the National Platform of the EP Civil Society Forum, another group of Belarusian NGOs initiated the Public Advisory Council, which was aimed to foster interactions between civil society and the state, yet under the patronage of state institutions. Whereas most of the Belarusian civil society organisations involved in the EaP national platform are pro-European and strive for independence from the regime, those in favour of the Public Advisory Council seek to work with the state. These two different positions towards the state and the EU have caused a significant split in among Belarusian civil society, which appears difficult to reconcile in the near future.

The EU indirectly encourages the split in Belarusian civil society by inviting almost exclusively pro-European Belarusian NGO's to the CSF. The EU also heavily relies on consultations with a small number of key pro-European NGO's in Minsk and Kiev, as main sources of information in devising policy towards Belarus. It should, of course, not be forgotten that the EU already significantly broadened its consultation with Belarusian civil society by involving groups other than those associated with the Belarusian opposition parties over the course of the

² Ibid.: p. 148

past decade. Nevertheless, more could be done by the EU to understand, cooperate with and support a wider and broader range of Belarusian civil society.³ One of these groups in civil society, and possibly the most important group for the future of Belarus, is youth. Young people have played a crucial role in the public protests following the rigged presidential elections in December 2010, and their activities are rarely covered in research and the media.

Young people in Belarus: Political force of 'silent majority'?

According to statistics 24 percent of the Belarusian population are young people in the age between 15 and 29 years old. The total figure of young population is 2.1 Million people⁴. How do they live? What is the difference between them and young people in other European countries?

The life of young people in Belarus is determined by the state, the society and their parents much more than the life determination of the persons at the same age in Western Europe. All this usually starts in kindergartens and at schools, where upbringing is conservative and the relationship between teachers and children is strictly regulated. Then, in the high school the study programs are strictly planned. And after that the graduates have to work two years in a state company, which is usually chosen by the university administration. The mechanism of such a job placement is a relict from the USSR.

Actually Belarus today is similar to a 'mini Soviet Union' with a strong vertical of power, planned economy, pro-government media and no private freedom of the citizenship. But the difference is obvious - Belarus is situated in the geographic centre of Europe nowadays and the country can not completely isolate itself from the rest of the world.

People who are now 15-22 years old do not know any time without Alexander Lukashenka because he has ruled the country for 17 years. But by using Internet, discussing various problems in the social networks, watching videos on YouTube and reading online media they

³ The European Parliament, for example, aimed to include 10 representatives of Belarusian civil society into the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly. Few MEPs involved in the Assembly recall the names of the proposed civil society groups (including two religious groups) and the reasons for choosing particular groups over others. Interview by the author with Members of the European Parliament, 10-21 October 2011.

⁴ Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus: <http://archive.minzdrav.gov.by/med/article/statsod.php?prg=3>.

have a possibility to get a view on this country from the outside. Some of them have been abroad and can compare the life there and the life in Belarus.⁵ There is a conflict between the youth and the generation of their parents who grew up in the Soviet Union, and who do not regularly use the Internet but get all the information from the state TV broadcasters and newspapers.

But there is not only a cleavage between the generations in the Belarusian society, the Belarusian youth is divided as well. The one part is the progressive, pro-Western and pro-Europe oriented young people. They regularly use internet, have knowledge of foreign language and probably even have been abroad. A lot of these people took part in the demonstration on December 19 in Minsk, where more than 600 people have been arrested. State television reported them as being very drunk, and that they were rowdies motivated by western money. Then the young people in Minsk used weblogs and social networks to call on people to donate everyday commodities and money for the detainees.⁶ They called this relief action 'guardian angel'. And this time the part of the Belarusian young people felt like they were 'betrayed' by the EU, because Brussels did not introduce economic sanctions against the regime of Alexander Lukashenka. After the brutal suppression of protests this summer and during the demonstration on December 19 in Minsk the number of young people who want to leave the country has increased tremendously.

After the reprisals that took place after the election, the 'classic' opposition movement had been paralyzed. A completely new group took their place. It was the group 'Revolution Through Social Networks' that created new forms of protests against the government. In June and July 2011 thousand of clapping protesters marched defiantly along the streets, following a call to protest, that had appeared in the social network 'Vkontakte'. This group of the internet activists managed to create something of a Belarusian civil society in only a few weeks. But these protests were also brutally crushed by the police.

The part of the Belarusian youth that are anti-governmentally oriented is heterogeneous. Some of them are members of the oppositional organisation like 'Malady Front' (Young

⁵ Many Belarusian young people have been in Italy, Germany, Canada, Denmark and other countries with so-called Chernobyl programs

⁶ For Example: <http://zhelezko.livejournal.com/47591.html#>

Front), 'Maladaya Belarus' (Young Belarus) or 'Moladz BNF' (Youth of BNF). This is the most active part of the oppositional youth in Belarus. It can be assumed that almost each member of such a youth movement has already been arrested or has had an interrogation by KGB. In addition, many representatives of this part of the Belarusian youth speak Belarusian language. According to Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) the awareness of the oldest young oppositional organisation 'Malady Front' has increased after the last elections (57 percent in March 2011 against 43 percent in September 2010).⁷

But the official pro-governmental organization BRSM (Belarussian republic youth union) is known better (83 percent of respondents). BRSM is the successor of the Communists Union of the Belarusian Youth. The members of this union have a lot of benefits starting with free tickets for concerts and cinemas to getting advantages by job placement. The BRSM is supported by the government. This organization gets 98 percent of the budget to support young people.⁸

The biggest part of the Belarusian youth is a silent majority. It is people who are focused on their private life, they want to protect their modest prosperity and are not interested in politics.

The future of civil society in Belarus: Missing links between silent majority and civil society?

Many commentators saw the public protests following the 2010 presidential elections as a 'true and honest middle class that forms the basis of democracy', and a sign that Belarusian civil culture was developing from an atomised society into a civil one.⁹ And indeed, a recent poll among the Belarusian population conducted by IISEPS (September 2011) suggested that two thirds of Belarusians now believe that their country was heading into the wrong direction, and that over 60 percent hold President Lukashenka responsible for the current economic crisis of the country. Moreover, Lukashenka's ratings have dropped from 53% in December 2010 to just 20.5% in September 2011. According to IISEPS's past surveys, this marks the lowest rating of Lukashenka since he to office in 1994. Yet, whereas the ratings of

⁷ National poll, IISEPS, March 2010: http://www.mfront.net/e107_images/newspost_images/0311mfbiel.pdf.

⁸ Belaruski partyzan, 18.01.2011. <http://belaruspartisan.org/bp-forte/?page=100&backPage=6&news=74993&newsPage=0>

⁹ Silitski, V. (2011) Requiem for a dialogue, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 13 January 2011, p. 2.

Lukashenka had dropped significantly, the ratings of the opposition candidates remained largely unchanged. In other words, there is certainly a growing frustration among society with the current president, but a convincing alternative is missing, too.

In September 2011, 28 percent of Belarusians saw themselves in opposition to the current government, which is 10 percent more than in December 2010 (18 percent), though still far from the majority. The majority of Belarusians had, however, heard of the 'Revolution through Social Networks' and the silent protest campaign (70 percent). Only 20 percent stated that they disapproved of the initiatives, 37 percent approved the campaigns and one third was 'indifferent'. The support for civil society initiatives is therefore relatively high, compared to the low ratings of the opposition candidates, though few Belarusians indicated that they are directly involved in the protest campaigns (7 percent).

The picture of society-civil society relations in Belarus today is therefore rather complex. On the one hand, the number of civil society initiatives, and especially those led by the country's youth, is growing steadily, and so is their visibility to the Belarusian population at large. On the other hand, civil society in Belarus is divided, in its views on the relationship with the state and between different generations.

Options for EU policy

The EU has long struggled to develop a coherent policy towards Belarus and faced several (mostly internal) obstacles to support civil society in the country. Many of its financial instruments are difficult to implement in a country in which NGO's are often not officially registered and have little knowledge of the often complicated and lengthy application process to receive EU funding. EU assistance is therefore invariably biased towards funding large projects (e.g. the European Humanities University as the Belarusian university in exile) to the detriment of small-scale bottom-up projects from different segments of Belarusian civil society. According to leading officials in the European Commission and the European External Action Service, the EU's 'technical' problems in supporting civil society in Belarus in practice are all but solved, despite renewed pledges to focus more intensively on civil society following the 2010 presidential elections. There are also competing attitudes in EU institutions about the very purpose of supporting civil society in Belarus. Whereas some EU

member states are convinced that Belarus can be democratised from the 'outside' and by offering targeted support to civil society, others, including officials in the Commission, believe that changes can only occur within the country and among its society.¹⁰

- *More should be done in the EU to develop relations with a broader range of civil society organisations in Belarus. The focus of the EU on pro-European NGOs is very laudable, though the exclusive focus on this group of NGOs is indirectly enhancing the growing divisions among civil society in Belarus.*
- *The EU should expand its programs for youth in Belarus and support small-scale projects, especially in the field of education.*
- *The EU should develop a clearer and more coherent vision of the purpose of its assistance for civil society in Belarus.*

¹⁰ Interview by the author with officials in the European Commission and the European External Action Service, 15 November 2011.