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CIVIL SOCIETY IN TODAY'S BELARUS AS AN ACTOR OF SOCIAL CHANGES ¹

This article studies the civil society possibilities to influence the social transformation processes in Belarus. Also the institutional framework and sociocultural conditions of the civil society functioning are studied. It is underlined that the authoritarian regime is aimed at maximum control establishing over the area of social initiative, meanwhile supporting civic initiatives which act in line with the certain state objectives. It is pointed out that the socio-cultural factors impact on the civil society in the Republic of Belarus is predominantly negative. The civil society's value background is analyzed. Are outlined segments, which in toxic social circumstances act creatively, efficiently, and sustainably.

Key words: civil society, social transformation, democratic transit, authoritarian regime, social initiatives.

General outline of the problem. For the last fifteen years Belarusian analysts have repeatedly been asking when Belarus will enter the phase of transformational change, i.e. democratic transition, and who will be its agent. (The dynamic developments in the neighbouring Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania have given a particular urgency to this question.) Different experts have made a whole list of social «demiurges», like rebellious bureaucracy, pressure from Russia or the West, «an awakened nation», tired of being just the electorate, street protesters on the Square, and even such an unusual social actors as Protestant communities. Strange as it may seem at first sight, the key players, namely the authoritarian president and political parties have hardly ever been mentioned. The former is let out because the so-called «Belarusian trajectory», i.e. the political system he has created suits him perfectly on both

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a political and personal level. Moreover, his age makes him an unlikely agent of change, since people do not change as they approach their sixties. The latter are not taken into consideration because they have been marginalized in society and invariably lead in negative ratings (see the findings of opinion polls conducted by the Independent Institute for Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)).

Researchers like Valiery Karbalevic who argues that we do not have a Western-style civil society, as it can only be formed and formatted within a democracy and an activism-based political culture, certainly have their reason. But does it mean that civil society is non-existent in Belarus? If it does exist, what are its basic features: (un)developed, weak, quasi-civil, etc.? Whether it can be an agent of social change is conditioned by the answer to this question. Uladzimir Mackievic, the well-known figure both in theory and practice of civil society, claims that in present-day Belarus it is civil society agencies or consolidated civil society despite all their weak points that can and must become true agents of social change. According to Uladzimir Mackievic, they must take charge of no less than the «fight against the dictatorship», articulating their demands to the regime and insisting that these demands are met [1, p. 54]. The events in Ukraine in the fall of 2013 and the winter of 2014 brought civil societies in the post-Soviet states in the spotlight, because the driving force behind the EuroMaidan as a specific type of political revolution was first and foremost civil society agencies, rather than the traditional political parties. According to Vitaly Kulik, Director of the Research Centre for Civil Society Problems, «*The EuroMaidan showed that civil society was becoming an agent of certain processes with its own articulated agenda and demands. Sometimes its demands do not meet those of political actors or political parties in parliament... Civil society demonstrated wonderful self-mobilization. As it comes out, it was informal networks or unsubsidized civic initiatives that took the lead in the organisation of the EuroMaidan process, events and actions... The formed the basis for civil society's becoming a fully-fledged agent of change on Maidan*» [2, p. 4]. In these circumstances, the principal is the analysis of the forms, methods and effectiveness of the impact of modern Belarusian CSOs on the social modernization processes in the country, which is the article's **objective**.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUNCTIONING OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN BELARUS. Civil society is a combination of various forms of social activity and self-organization of the country's population, not mediated by the state, but with its possible partnership. And it's not only about the activities of certain public organisations, but also about the whole spectrum of informal social initiatives.

According to official data, 1 January 2016, 2,665 civic organisations were registered in Belarus, of which 225 were international, 716 were republican and 1,724 were local. About 200 civil society organisations have been registered in 2015 in Lithuania and Poland. A constant growth of charitable projects is under way. More and more organisations are registered in the form of «establishments».

Before we proceed to analyse the potential of the civil society agencies as the driving force of social change, it is necessary to highlight the framework for their functioning, both institutional and socio-cultural, since this framework predetermines their potential.

First and foremost, we have to underscore that classical authoritarian regime has been strengthening in Belarus. It allows for the existence of the civil society sector but its inner logic leads the regime to isolate politicized members of this sector and place it under as much control as possible. There is, however, some space, albeit limited, for administrative and financial support for civic agencies and initiatives that act in line with certain agendas of the government, for example, NGOs representing disabled people.

So what are the implications for the civil society sector? Actually, there is just one: it must set tasks that are achievable in the current political environment! An authoritarian regime, especially a consolidated one, is completely predictable. If some organisations and initiatives put forward political goals like a «a struggle against regime», «regime change» and «civic resistance to the dictatorship», they put themselves in a situation of «*The Oak and the Calf*», something that we remember well from the Soviet epoch. In this case, «*a la guerre comme a la guerre*», with all the coercive power of the state striking such organisations in order to marginalize and isolate them from society [3; 4]. Naturally, the first ones to be targeted are human rights organisations and NGOs affiliated with political parties. In this situation it looks odd when such agencies call for creating communication grounds for a dialog with the government, cooperation in developing plans of reforms, etc. The logic of war precludes a win-win deal: somebody wins, somebody loses.

One of the side effects of this course of action is that other organisations and initiatives that are not politicized shun all possible overtones in their work towards fulfilling their mission. For this reason it was not surprising that in October 2012 most of the NGOs did not endorse the concept of a National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF) proposed by Euro-Belarus. The concept envisaged a confrontation with the government, so the majority turned it down for the fear of being marginalized and cut off from channels of communication with governmental and social institutions, like their partisan counterparts. However, Uladzimir Mackievic's team pursue a radical agenda for the most part on the verbal level, while in practice their activities are basically aimed at carrying out analytical and cultural projects in the context of 'bringing Belarus to Europe'.

Today's Belarus find itself in an unusual position, when a number of civil society agencies declare they are prepared to struggle for a transformation of the political regime, whereas political parties, guided by public image considerations, are increasingly focusing on tasks outside their agendas. For example, they initiate road resurfacing, residential site improvements, putting up garbage cans, etc. at local level.

As for the socio-cultural framework, it has a predominantly negative influence on civil society agencies. In this respect political orientations of young Belarusians can be regarded as a litmus test, since this very social group tra-

ditionally appears to be the herald, agent and barometer of the social change. According to Alieh Manajey of the IISEPS, the findings of extensive surveys show that only a few per cent of young people in Belarus are oriented towards political activism aiming to transform authoritarian regime. In general, «although young people have stronger pro-European attitudes than the older generation, their basic socio-cultural identity can still be described as Eurasian» [5, p. 17–18].

Independence from state institutions is certainly a basic feature of the civil society. In reality, however, nearly all social practices of its agencies are to some extent conditioned by the government or require support from the state, even if we deal with civic activism «in its pure form». In this type of environment even international donor foundations and organisations providing technical assistance to Belarusian civil society agencies are rational enough to require that their beneficiaries work in partnership with the state authorities.

CIVIL SOCIETY AS AN AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE. It is just wishful thinking to expect systemic social transformations in Belarus from civil society agencies, since this sector has no influential and resource-intensive organisations to act as agents of such a change.

This, however, does not mean that civil society agencies have no *raison d'être*. It is just that they should do exactly what their mission and statutes say. Any systemic change is obviously rooted in small steps, which in the long run lead to large-scale transformation. As Andrzej Sulima Kaminski aptly put it, «citizens are born in a struggle for their own and their children's fundamental everyday rights, for the ability to make decisions concerning their street, neighbourhood, village or town» [6, p. 14].

Civil society agencies in Belarus are not modern social losers. Unlike political parties, which have a long history of failures, there are a lot of examples of real success stories among them, in spite of the highly unfavourable and toxic political environment. Success here is measured in three dimensions. Firstly, it is the ability to influence decision-making by the state institutions in specific social areas. Secondly, it is high effectiveness in meeting the demands of their target groups. Thirdly, it is an upward trend in the development of the organisation/initiative, its growing competence and importance for community. What we mean here is the so-called «growth points» that should be strengthened by all means in today's civil society agencies.

Let us elaborate on this point. First, success stories among the leaders of the present-day Belarusian civil society undoubtedly include analytical centres in the form of think tanks. Although the NGO Belarusian Think Tanks and the IISEPS were short-lived and eventually liquidated by the authorities, the number of independent analysts and institutions in this field has noticeably grown for the past decade. There are at least three reasons for that: (1) the government understands that it is impossible to control the expert community and their ideas; (2) the West is still interested in expert analysis of the situation in Belarus, which implies financial support; (3) there are a lot of young analysts who cannot work for Belarusian state agencies for political and ideological reasons, so they are engaged in the independent research

sector. The think tanks have a tangible influence on the country's political processes. Suffice it to say that there is a great demand for the findings of opinion polls, particularly the IISEPS electoral ratings, in Belarusian society.

Second, civil society agencies focus on issues of great importance to the society and the state, as viewed by (not only) the government, lead a relatively comfortable existence. Here we mean first and foremost various social welfare and sports organisations. Their work is not blocked; on the contrary, it is encouraged through social subsidies and preferences.

Third, the segment of Agenda'21 at local level is developing quite successfully, in part because the government sees it as an extra tool to attract investment to rural areas and communities, at the same time maintaining control over their actions. A variety of civil society agencies have been established within the framework of Agenda'21, including initiative groups to pursue Agenda'21 at local level, sustainable development information centres, local development funds, and eco-tourists clusters and destinations management councils. The number of such initiatives is steadily on the increase; there are already over a hundred of them, for the most part in rural communities and schools. The 2030 National Sustainable Development Strategy for the Republic of Belarus that is now being drawn up envisages sustainable development strategies at local and regional levels. Although their influence on local communities should not be overestimated, there is no denying the fact that they do not only have important social, economic and environmental effects on their areas but also teach the local populations some basics of civic self-organisation. This is essentially what their mission is all about.

Fourth, public councils of various shapes and forms are showing positive dynamics. Their number has exceeded 1,500. The findings of the survey conducted by Volha Smalianka and Yury Cavusau have revealed effectiveness of public councils at regional level [7]. Among the most successful ones are public councils for agro- and eco-tourism, whereas public councils in the social welfare field have proved less effective due to conflicts of interests and competition for resources. There is a social demand for public councils in the housing and utilities sector.

Fifth, elderly people are markedly becoming more socially active, channelling their energy into setting up clubs for elderly people, involvement in educational programmes, self-help groups, etc. This change has been caused by the remodelling of their fundamental outlook on «the western standard», when old age is no longer viewed as a time of decline but is instead perceived as a stage that opens new opportunities in various fields, including the social sphere.

Sixth, new forms of social communication such as the Internet communities are rapidly growing. Their networks carry out socially important projects in such areas as charity, influence on people's mindset, public events, etc.

Seventh, boosting social competences of various social players is an important part of civil society's work. Belarus has a well-developed informal educational network, which aims to train people to become active citizens and develop their leadership qualities, implement cultural projects, etc. It can be

argued that in some areas, like agro- and eco-tourism, to give just one example, civil society agencies have played a decisive role in the dissemination of new competences. It is the Belarusian civil society agencies that deserve credit for the rapid growth of this sector, which is a positive sign.

Eights, the NGOs are public initiatives that have set out on creating a communication ground for a certain part of Belarusian society and the people and governments of the EU in order to promote the «European idea» and engagement with the EU have had some success. For example, according to the Director of the Centre for European Transformation Andrej Jahorau, members of the EaP CSF rose to the EaP political decision-making level, which opened up «a window of opportunity, albeit limited, to influence the process of cooperation between Belarus and the EU». [8, p. 53] In this turn, Uladzimir Mackievic points out that Belarusian civil society and active citizens are already quite closely integrated into the whole of European civil society, and the proactive CSF National Platform has initiated a number of processes within the EaP framework.

Ninth, in recent years, the organisation of actions aimed at the Belarusian identity strengthening has become widespread. Here should be mentioned Belarusian language courses, historical and cultural sites renovation, archaeological excavations, etc.

Tenth, in Belarus a significant increase in material donations is observing today. For example, a charitable auction «MaeSens», where people meet each other collected in 2015 about 3.5 bn rubles (about \$ 230,000) — this is more than two previous years taken together.

Finally, Belarusian civil society agencies undoubtedly deserve credit for initiating, lobbying and implementing new practices. These include sustainable development strategies, social mandate, development of alternative energy sources, new models of reforming the system of government, changes in the doing-business environment, etc.

CONCLUSIONS. The findings of the research show that the preset Belarusian civil society agencies are unable to become the initiators and agents of systemic social change. At the same time, they are clearly able to produce change at local level, in specific social spheres and regions, even in the existing environment, which is rather toxic. In order to make change they should be rational and realistic in setting their goals. Some organisations and individuals call for placing political demands quintessentially expressed in the slogan «Belarus without Lukashenka» at the core of civil society's work. Not only does it go beyond their mission as formulated in their statutes, but also provokes direct controversies with the regime. In the situation of incommensurably less power and resources they are forced onto margins of society, into the so-called 'democratic ghetto'.

It is clear that today the number of civic activists and civil society organisations in Belarus is relatively small. However, it is just a matter of time for the civil organisations to accumulate critical mass and become a precursor of large-scale social change.

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**ГРАЖДАНСКОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО СОВРЕМЕННОЙ БЕЛАРУСИ
КАК СУБЪЕКТ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ПЕРЕМЕН**

Аннотация

В статье изучаются возможности влияния структур гражданского общества на процессы социальной трансформации в Беларуси. Исследуются рамочные институциональные и социокультурные условия их функционирования. Отмечается, что авторитарный режим нацелен на установление максимального контроля за этой сферой социальной деятельности, одновременно оказывая поддержку общественным структурам и инициативам, действующих в русле решения определенных государственных задач. Указывается, что воздействие социокультурных факторов на гражданское общество РБ является преимущественно негативным. Анализируются ценностные основания структур гражданского общества. Выделяются его сегменты, которые в сложных социальных обстоятельствах действуют креативно, эффективно и устойчиво.

Ключевые слова: гражданское общество, социальная трансформация, демократический транзит, авторитарный режим, общественная активность.

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**ГРОМАДЯНСЬКЕ СУСПІЛЬСТВО СУЧАСНОЇ БІЛОРУСІ
ЯК СУБ'ЄКТ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ ЗМІН**

Анотація

У статті вивчаються можливості впливу структур громадянського суспільства на процеси соціальної трансформації в Білорусі. Досліджуються рамкові інституціональні та соціокультурні умови їх функціонування. Зазначається, що авторитарний режим налаштований на встановлення максимального контролю за цією сферою соціальної самодіяльності, водночас надаючи підтримку громадським структурам та ініціативам, які діють задля вирішення певних державних завдань. Наголошено, що вплив соціокультурних чинників на громадянське суспільство РБ є переважно негативним. Аналізуються ціннісні основи структур громадянського суспільства. Виділяються його сегменти, які в складних соціальних умовах діють креативно, ефективно і стійко.

Ключові слова: громадянське суспільство, соціальна трансформація, демократичний транзит, авторитарний режим, громадська активність.