



ЦЭНТР ЕЎРАПЕЙСКАЙ ТРАНСФАРМАЦЫИ
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Quarterly
analytical
report

Introduction

This paper presents the results of monitoring of processes taking place in the Belarusian civil society in the period from April to June 2012. The program monitoring is conducted by the Center for European Transformation, starting from April 2011^{*}, in order to track the dynamics of development of civil society organizations working in the field of democratic transitions through specific actions, advocacy-campaigns, protecting human rights, system of organizational development. The monitoring framework defines the following set of processes that have been monitored and analyzed:

- Formation and development of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.
- Development of the processes of civil society dialogue with national and local authorities.
- International cooperation and interaction with civil society in Europe, in the Eastern Partnership countries, international donors and European structures.
- Expansion of “composition” of civil society and cooperation with various types of entities.
- Development of the quality and effectiveness of promotion and advocacy work, realization of the rights of target groups.
- Changes in terms of civil society activity.

The presented analysis is based on monitoring of the media, analytical materials and normative documents, monitoring the terms of NGOs’ activity and law enforcement practices, as well as special analysis of civic initiatives. The results obtained allow assessing the situation in the processes in the Belarusian civil society development and setting priorities for further development.

^{*} The methodology of program monitoring and its results for prior and subsequent periods can be found by following this link: <http://cet.eurobelarus.info/en/news/2012/06/01/civil-society-program-monitoring-EN.html>.

State and development of civil society in Belarus

Analytical report based on monitoring materials

April-June 2012

General political conditions and circumstances

The political context for the existence and activities of civil society, as well as in the previous period, was still set up by the forthcoming parliamentary election. The date of holding the latter was announced on June 18, 2012, which marked the beginning of the official start of the campaign. The attention of the political forces, the official authorities, and the media in the period under review was focused on the electoral issues. Thus it can be predicted that up to September 23, 2012 (the election date) and for some time after this, the situation will not radically change. The unresolved issue of consolidation and agreement on a common strategic line of democratic forces' activity on the upcoming election, which has been written on earlier, defeated the purpose of political significance of the campaign. The probable situation turns can be promoted only by the authorities' actions, as the possibility remains for the latter to move on the relative liberalization and the release of political prisoners.

Some changes of non-critical nature have occurred in the international arena. A diplomatic conflict between Belarus and the EU, having started in the previous period, has been resolved in April and May. The parties actually went on to make mutual concessions. The Belarusian authorities released two political prisoners and, despite the aggressive rhetoric, removed their claims to European diplomats. The EU has temporarily postponed the decision on new sanctions on Belarus and recommended the ambassadors to return, which happened in late May. The relations with the European Union came back to the situation of the beginning of 2011. Thus the parties actually have remained in the same positions, and the issue of the release of political prisoners is critical for the resumption of dialogue. The European dialogue on modernization with Belarusian society, announced in late March 2012, has potentially set a new framework for relations between Belarus and the EU, but its development in this period was not very dynamic.

The establishment and development of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

The activity of the National Platform was conditioned by the preparation for the next Conference (late June). The Conference "The National Platform: 2012 — new reality in no new conditions", should have resolved a number of issues, in particular: defining the strategy, consolidation of the institutional foundations of the activity, election of permanent coordinating bodies, voting on the list of organizations recommended to take part in the IV Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in Stockholm. Unfortunately, the assembly of the permanent members (58 organizations and civil society initiatives of Belarus, having signed the Memorandum of Cooperation) failed to determine the Concept of Development of the National Platform. As in the previous period, the stumbling block became the issues of the National Platform activity expanded mandate, decision-making procedures and expanding the competence of the governing bodies. To continue working on the Concept, the conciliation commission has been formed of representatives of organizations adhering to different guidelines.

A significant event was the accession to the National Platform of the two largest social and political structures — the Movement “For Freedom”) and the campaign “Tell the truth!”. As a success may also be considered the election of the Permanent Steering Committee of the 7 persons with the plenary powers for 1 year. Its membership is currently more balanced compared to the previous composition of the Interim Steering Committee, dominated by the representatives of the International Consortium “EuroBelarus”. In terms of organization under the National Platform the Interregional Group was formed that has set for itself the task of creation and development of regional platforms.

As previously, the main task for the National Platform is its own growth and strengthening at the international, national and regional levels. However, internal conflicts substantially slow its progress in this direction.

Development of a dialogue with national and local authorities

Significant progress during this period in the development of civil society dialogue with the authorities at various levels did not happen. Belarusian civil society is still excluded from the structure of making meaningful decisions both at the national and local levels. In early June, the head of the Belarusian Voluntary Society of Historical and Cultural Monument Conservation Anton Astapovich sent an appeal to the Prime Minister with demand of the dissolution of the Public Advisory Council under the Ministry of Culture. Astapovich states there is no work of the Council as a consequence of sabotage of the Ministry of Culture.

During this period there was a slight intensification of cooperation between the state and civil society at the local level. In particular, in June public hearings were held in Bielaaziorsk on the issue of construction of the lead plant, in May local authorities held a public consultation on the reconstruction of the Hancavičy city’s square. On June 10 the Executive Committee meeting was held in Mahilioŭ with community organizations of the region, where the authorities expressed dissatisfaction with the level of interaction with civil society. However, the meeting was more of a ritual nature, as only pro-government public bodies were invited to participate.

As before, the intensification of the dialogue depends on the resolution of the issue of dialogue at the national level, which is impossible without the overall growth of the civil society influence on the country’s processes.

Expansion of civil society “composition” and cooperation with various types of entities

In the light of the unfolding political campaign for election of deputies to the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus, there is actually no point of speaking of any improvement of the interaction of various civil society actors. The politically-oriented part of civil society organizations is in a state of fragmentation; at the time of announcement of election date no overall strategy or tactics of joint actions in the electoral campaign had been worked out by them. Failure of the authorities to comply with the demand of release of all political prisoners in the country did not become an obstacle for significant part of political actors to make statements on participation in the election process; it only served as an excuse for the opposition why it proved once again to be unprepared to the elections.

Any special support for political organizations by other civil society organizations hasn’t also been observed; on the contrary — the tendency of distancing from them has reinforced. As one of the positive aspects, the signing of the Memorandum on Cooperation by the Movement “For Freedom” and the campaign “Tell the truth!” could be mentioned, done under the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum activity. Thus, they

became permanent members of the National Platform, authorized to make any decisions regarding the future development of the Platform.

Previous forms of grassroots civic activity, manifested in forms of political protests (such as silent protest actions and “Stop Petrol” actions), as it had been indicated in previous reports, lost their attractiveness at the beginning of autumn 2011. But in the April-June 2012 the trend of active defense of their interests by local communities was even more clearly delineated. Reports began to appear in the media as on the protests of groups of citizens from different cities of Belarus against actions of local and higher authorities, which were, according to the protesters, directly infringing their interests. These protests were not of political, but mainly of social, educational, or way-of-life nature.

Thus, in the district of Minsk “Uruchcha-2” local residents are protesting against the seal housing development; in Minsk residents of the streets adjacent to the Park of the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution — against its clearing and construction on the site of Chinese hotel “Beijing”; the villagers and country settlements in Smaliavičy district (Minsk region) — against the construction of the Belarusian-Chinese industrial park; residents of Bielaazorsk (Biaroza district, Brest region) — against the construction of the plant for the production of lead; residents of city of Biarozaŭka (Lida district, Hrodna region) — against the construction of the production of glass wool; residents of Rahačoŭ (Homel region) — against the transfer of the capital of the upcoming Republican festival — fair for rural toilers “Dazhynki” from their city to the regional center; residents of the suburb of Svietlahorsk (Homel region) — against construction of a plant for production of bleached kraft pulp; residents of cottage settlements under Baraŭliany (Minsk district) — against construction near their cottages of a plant for production of chemicals; residents of the cottage settlement “Kaliadzičy-2” (Minsk district) — against plans of construction of a new district of Minsk “Green Forest” and marshalling railway yard; the Polish community in Hrodna — against creation of two Russian-language classes in the only Polish school in the city; residents of two apartment buildings of Brest — against unauthorized construction of a pharmacy building under their houses’ windows, and other.

Focuses of civil disturbance in the majority occur spontaneously, and, most often, already in situations of obvious problems arisen, i.e. when decisions on certain issues, infringing upon the interests of citizens, have already been adopted by the authorities, and, moreover, when these solutions are beginning to be implemented. The initiators of protests are, as a rule, small groups of active residents who come into opposition with authorities; more rarely protests people are led by the civil society organizations’ activists (environmental or socio-political structures). A common is a situation when initiative groups of local residents refuse to joint action, especially with political orientation organizations. The main argument against joint actions is often the fear that participation of opposition organizations reduces the chances to any concessions to the protesters from the state. The public authorities have successfully reinforced these concerns by conducting detentions, arrests and fining of civil society activists, organizing and participating in protest activities.

International cooperation and interaction

The European dialogue on modernization with Belarusian society and operation of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum were setting the basic framework for international cooperation of civil society. The Forum has made significant progress in developing its relations with other structures of the Eastern Partnership; in particular, the representatives of the Steering Committee of the EaP CSF were participants of the meeting of the parliamentary dimension of EURONEST (April 2012); after removal of the objections of the Belarusian government, civil society representatives can participate in formal thematic platforms’ work of the Eastern Partnership.

Under the dialogue on the modernization the first thematic meeting (Warsaw) on the privatization in Belarus was held in April 2012. The meeting was attended by representatives of official structures of the EU, Polish Foreign Ministry, Belarusian civil society and representatives of the Belarusian authorities. Since June, the consultations has begun in the framework of expert working groups in Minsk with the participation of the EU countries' ambassadors, the Management Committee of the European dialogue on the modernization was formed of representatives of the coordinators of the working groups. The Belarusian authorities are currently abstaining from participation in the working groups of the dialogue, which significantly limits their ability to influence the implementation of the reform proposals being developed.

In other formats, the interaction has been expressed in traditional reactions to the situation with human rights in Belarus. The focus was mainly on the human rights problems (appeals of international human rights organizations, officials and structures of the EU, individual European politicians and public figures), the campaign has been launched of a series of European human rights organizations against holding the World Hockey Championship in Belarus (April-June, 2012). Reports from number of international organizations on human rights issues (Freedom House, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch) again noted the deplorable situation in Belarus (May-June, 2012). Several times a topic was arisen as on violations of independent trade unions' rights in relation to the situation at the enterprise "Granit" (Russian Interregional Auto Workers union (the statement, April, 2012), International Labour Organization (plans to discuss the problem of "Granit", June, 2012)).

The issue of the Belarusian government in exile was actively debated in May 2012. The beginning of the debate was launched by the critical comments of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Audronius Ažubalis in respect to the Belarusian opposition and plans to support it. The minister said that there was need to create an alternative center of power outside of Belarus. The topic was actively picked up by a part of organizations of political immigrants, but met the strong opposition from within Belarus, as from the majority of opposition politicians, so from civil society organizations. The Rada (the Council) of Belarusian National Republic also expressed against this idea. Opponents of creating of a government in exile insist on the non-legitimacy of such a step, and the impossibility of determining the fate of the country by someone outside the country.

Organizational capacity and abilities to advocacy work, promoting and protecting the interests

In April-June 2012, a number of previous public campaigns and initiatives that have not obtained the expected result, almost came to naught; however, new situations and manifestations of civic activity in advocacy, promotion and protection of interests have arisen. Using the typology presented in the previous quarterly report, we'll list the most notable of the campaigns and initiatives, being unfolded in the analyzed period of time.

1. Initiatives-appeals (speeches with statements, adoption of petitions and resolutions, campaigns to collect signatures can also be listed here). These initiatives, for all their ineffectiveness, remain one of the most common types. Mainly three issues were actualized in April-June 2012: protection of political prisoners (including former ones), the upcoming parliamentary election and building of the Belarusian nuclear power plant.

In defense of political prisoners were: with statements — the BPF Party and the Human Rights Center "Viasna". The first one — on the occasion of release from prison of former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau and his confidant, coordinator of the civil campaign "European Belarus" Dzmitry Bandarenka (mid-April, 2012); the second — demanding the termination of criminal prosecution for violating the terms of preventive supervision of

the former political prisoner Vasil Parfiankou (end of April, 2012); under the campaign to collect signatures for an open letter addressed to the Attorney General — the civil campaign “Tell the Truth!”, which required to cease prosecution of its activist and former political prisoner Pavel Vinahradau, once again having been subjected to administrative arrest (end of April, 2012); in resolutions — participants of the “Chernobyl Shlach” (“Chernobyl Way”; end of April, 2012), participants of the Congress of the Assembly of NGOs (mid-June, 2012) and participants of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (the end of June, 2012).

The resolutions adopted by the participants of “Chernobyl Shlach” and the Conference of the National Platform also contained calls to free and fair parliamentary elections in the country.

Participants of the traditionally held “Chernobyl Shlach” (on the anniversary of the Chernobyl accident) in their resulting documents expressed against the construction of a nuclear power plant in the Astraviec district (Homel region), as well as the participants of the Congress of the Assembly of NGOs. Brest civil society activists under the campaign “We live, we decide on: NO — to the new Fukushima and New Chernobyl!” in May 2012 were collecting signatures under petition to the governments of Belarus, Lithuania and Russia with call to suspend plans to build nuclear power plants in these three countries. On May 31, on the day of the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Minsk, Belarusian environmentalists transferred through the Russian embassy an open appeal to his name and to the address of the Russian Federation government with the justification of inadmissibility of construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant.

Among other topics, updated through the appeals, we can mention: protests of Svietlahorsk and Svietlahorsk district inhabitants (Homiel region) against the construction of the plant for the production of bleached kraft pulp (during March-May 2012 10 thousand signatures of local residents were collected under protest appeal to the Administration of the President and Council of Ministers); requirements of wheelchair users of maintenance of an article of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus that guarantees a dignified life, freedom of movement, the right to adequate social security, as well as the accession of Belarus to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (an appeal to the Belarusian president with this content was taken at a meeting of wheelchair users, on May 5, 2012 in Minsk); animal advocates’ demands to investigate and prosecute persons involved in the fact of knackery in respect to the tens of cormorant chicks on one of ponds in the area of Čašniki (Viciebsk region); collecting signatures for a petition to the prosecutor's office of the Viciebsk region was organized through the Internet, resulting in thousands of signatures collected).

2. Initiatives to raise funds. As before, this type of initiatives demonstrates its effectiveness because of the clarity and certainty of goal set, and for this reason these initiatives appear to be the most positive examples of manifestations of civic solidarity. Thus, in the middle of May 2012 raising money was launched on the initiative of Director of the Museum of History of Mahilioŭ to purchase the copy of the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania of 1588, having been exposed to the open Internet auction by a Moscow collector. The required amount of \$45 thousand was collected within two weeks. Herewith the state participation in the campaign to raise funds was manifested mainly through the appeals of the National Bank and the Ministry of Culture to commercial structures with a request to provide financial assistance, and the lion's share of funds was received as a result of donations from local entrepreneurs and businessmen from Belarus, living in Moscow. As a result, the historical relic was handed over to Belarus on June 7.

3. Initiatives of local residents against the construction of environmentally hazardous facilities, or facilities, deteriorating living conditions. For more information about this type of initiatives, see chapter “Expansion of civil society “composition” and cooperation with various types of entities”.

4. Initiatives to promote the Belarusian language. In the analyzed period of time in the field of view of the media there got a new campaign in the service and advertising sphere titled “Here you can be served in the Belarusian language, as well”, initiated by the civil initiative “Spravavodstva pa belaruskju” (“Office work in Belarusian language”). The campaign aims to mark with special stickers the sites, where Belarusian-speaking customers can be gladly served in the Belarusian language.

5. Social initiatives. With the beginning of cycling season, velo-activists organized a series of actions and campaigns aimed at mainstreaming equality of motorists and cyclists’ rights on the roads, as well as courteous relationship with pedestrians. In early May 2012 about fifty members of the club “VeloHome1” organized a public skating to this end at the center of the city, and activists “For Velo-Brest” during the cycling season of 2012 launched a campaign consisting of a series of public events and flash mobs called “Safe sidewalks” and “A cyclist is a full-fledged participant of the road traffic!”.

6. Initiatives of a political nature. In a situation of unfolding the campaign for election of deputies to the National Assembly and determining the subjects of the political opposition over their participation in these elections, to the campaigns for election observation, arisen earlier, there added a number of campaigns and initiatives, advocating for a boycott. In early April 2012, Brest democratic coalition “Spadchyna” (“Heritage”), which includes regional organizations BCD, Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Assembly), “European Belarus”, “Young Belarus” and “Belarusian Movement”, announced its withdrawal from the organizing committee of the campaign “For Fair elections” and the establishment of the Brest regional headquarter of the “People's boycott”. On April 11, 2012 the United Civil Party (OGP) of Belarus has announced the launch of the campaign “For Fair Elections without Lukashenko”, setting the task of promoting of the OGP representatives to the candidates, but without participation in the procedure of elections and withdrawal of their candidacies the day before election. On April 19, 2012 a number of youth activists from political parties and movements announced the creation of the coalition “Ignore-2012”. This coalition included: “Young Front”, “Revolution Through Social Networks”, youth of the “European Belarus”, “Young Social Democrats — Young hulk”, the youth wing of the United Civil Party “Young Democrats” and the youth wing of the “Tell the Truth!” — “Zmena”.

Among other initiatives and political campaigns that occurred in April-June 2012, may be listed the following:

- In early April 2012 the initiative was announced by the leader of “Tell the Truth!” Uladzimir Niakliayeu to convene a new All-Belarusian Assembly. The idea was supported in the open letter by the co-chairs of All-Belarusian Assembly for independence, held 12 years ago: Ryhor Baradulin, Henadz Buraukin, Radzim Haretsky and Anatol Grytskevich. They called on all democratic forces, public associations and political parties to join the initiative in order to create an organizing committee meeting and to hold it until the end of 2012. As the main purpose of the meeting the applicants named the need to discuss the situation in the country, in order to find ways for correcting mistakes on this basis and put the joint tasks for further development of the national Belarusian state.
- On April 26, 2012 the traditional mass march “Chernobyl Shlah” was held, being held annual since 1988, the day of the accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Carrying out activities was authorized by the authorities.
- In early May 2012 the ex-presidential candidate and former political prisoner Dzmitry Us held a meeting of the initiative group which has set itself the goal of amending the electoral law. On May 25 it filed the necessary documents to the CEC to register the initiative group.

- In mid-May 2012 a retired colonel Uladzimir Baradach, who now lives in emigration, initiated the establishment by the former officers and former employees of intelligence agencies of “The transitional government in exile”, and at the end of the same month it was announced of creation of an organizing committee “The Council of the national revival of Belarus”. In a memorandum adopted by the organizing committee it was stated that the Council sought to become a “general organizational and coordinating center of the struggle of the Belarusian people for their national state”, and afterwards — formation on its base of an alternative center of the new Belarusian authorities (the transitional interim government).
- In early June 2012 on the initiative of the Rada (Council) of the Belarusian Intelligentsia a round table was held with participation of leaders of the democratic opposition and civil society organizations, in which the head of Rada Uladzimir Kolas urged all present to decide on common goals and agree on ways to achieve them. This attempt was unsuccessful.

7. Initiatives of symbolic solidarity. As in the previous periods analyzed, actions of symbolic solidarity were carried out with sufficient regularity and were not of broad nature. In addition to themes of protection and support of political prisoners, they have also been associated with memorable or holiday dates (anniversary of the Chernobyl power plant accident, the anniversary of the referendum of 1995, the 1st and 9th of May, etc.).

Changes in terms of activity and structures of civil society

On June 14, 2012 the House of Representatives approved on second reading the bill “On State Security”, and already on June 20 did the same the Council of the Republic. The bill was introduced in Parliament on September 30, 2011 in the form of amendments to the law, acting since 1997 “On the organs of state security”. At that time the contents of the bill in the form in which it was submitted to Parliament, caused a great resonance among human rights groups and other public organizations in Belarus, as the amendments made further expand the powers of the state security bodies and create conditions for limiting the right to liberty, privacy and dignity of personality. As we noted earlier, the bill not worsened the real state of social structures, but rather fixed the existing status quo. New amendments have created a legal basis for a new round of repressions against civil society, particularly in the situation of unfolding election campaign in the Parliament.