

## **Belarus Civil Society at the Crossroads** (Working Paper of the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force)

Institute for Civic Diplomacy/Pontis Foundation  
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### **Introduction:**

This document has been prepared as the first memorandum under the project of the Pontis Foundation called the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force: Civil Society and serves to inform interested parties on current developments in civil society in Belarus.

The overall objective of the Slovak-Belarus Task Force is to establish a framework for Slovak know-how transfer to Belarus on key aspects of civil society development. The project seeks to achieve the following goals:

- To assist civil society in Belarus in preparation for the upcoming presidential elections in the autumn of 2006 through qualitative research (focus groups) using Slovak know-how from 1998 and 2002, with focus on identification of specific target groups and related public outreach and civic education activities;
- To further integrate think tanks within civil society in Belarus by linking their expertise and capacity with Belarusian NGOs through the Task Force;
- To improve the possibilities for a civil coalition before 2006 and improve the quality of messages and target groups, as well the ability of civil society organizations to mobilize well-defined segments of Belarusian society.

Slovakia has many advantages in delivering assistance to Belarus: it has no direct historical engagement with Belarus, but due to its size and recent political development, it is more (politically) neutral to Belarus than its neighbors. In addition, Slovakia shares many socio-cultural values with Belarus: it is very close to Belarus through its culture and language, but also as a newly established state that gained its independence in 1993. The fact that Slovakia (alone among EU members) successfully overcame a difficult transition from being a communist country, through the Mečiar era, to EU and NATO membership, is an extremely important and positive message for democratic forces in Belarus.

## **Belarus After the Referendum:**

The results of the 2004 campaign showed that Belarusian political realignment is underway. For the first time, the opposition gained the majority. One can argue about the accuracy of (exit poll) numbers; however, it is obvious that the incumbent failed to win majority support of the Belarusian electorate for the first time. The gap between the backward regime and the forward-looking population is likely only to grow in the future, a trend that the recent results in the Ukrainian elections will likely fuel. Public opinion has become embarrassed with the official propaganda, and the regime will have to rely increasingly on repression in the future. While public opinion is changing, people are still not ready to become real citizens and fight for their rights and/or change. One of the main reasons for this public reluctance (the lack of hope) could be challenged by Ukraine's Orange Revolution. For the first time in the electoral history of Belarus, electoral fraud was transparent, massive, and aggressive. The number of people involved in perpetrating fraud is certainly larger than in 2001 and 1996. The majority of people probably has a certain sense that Lukashenko is in the minority now, but is too afraid to speak up and/or go out to the streets for various reasons. The economy looks better for many people, and there is no "nothing to lose" factor, yet. State employees are on fixed-term contracts, and they are unlikely to find new jobs to support themselves, thus fearful of losing their livelihoods. State media have managed to present the opposition as "losers," and people still do not want to associate themselves with the opposition. Belarusian youth tends to maintain an attitude of "I have nothing to do with it," which is likely connected with the fact that people in Belarus in general do not perceive themselves as citizens. This all leads to a "civic apathy" syndrome, which could be solved over a longer period of time than the international community perhaps expects (or would be willing to commit to), but must include the help for civil society. It is crucial to come up with new, innovative ways of supporting citizens, especially coming from the European community, given the timeframe and the current shift of mood of the society, and taking into account the referendum and parliamentary elections development, as well as the situation of Ukraine.

## **Role of Civil Society:**

One of the key roles of civil society in Belarus is to prepare a strategy for mobilizing citizens to support democratic change. Currently, there are three overwhelming characteristics of Belarus society:

- a strong fear of an uncertain future, of (any) change, and of the repression that may follow any action;
- widespread political apathy generally stated as: "nothing is possible, nothing makes sense;" and
- growing need for, and attention to, the democratic modernization of society.

Observations suggest that different layers of society can be distinguished based on their relations to these stereotypes. For example, the younger generation has more fear of repression, rather than of change or uncertainty of the future. The most striking aspect of the general mood is the widespread apathy toward the continuance of rule of President Lukashenko. This sentiment is most easily identifiable in the atmosphere surrounding the elections and referendum, but also in the overwhelming resignation to the belief that the president is powerful enough to do whatever he wishes. However, great majority of Belarusian citizens is aware that their country is somewhere other than official propaganda wants them to believe.

The lack of alternative Western socio-cultural models reinforces the image of the current authoritarian regime, which offers comparison only toward the East. There is a strong tendency to adapt to the regime and use all the benefits (e.g. to choose materialistically) rather than to behave in accordance with a set of higher values. “Freedom,” “democracy,” and “Europe” are all abstractions that are generally unclear to the overwhelming majority of Belarusians. The lack of comprehension of these ideas also inhibits them from fueling civic activism. There is a strong historical tendency of citizens to follow social demagogy, which reinforces the strong social base of Lukashenko’s regime.

### **Who is Who?<sup>1</sup>**

But who is this “civil society” to which the most important policy papers and international documents refer? As in many other aspects of Belarus, there is a lack of deeper background information about the current development of civil society. In addition, there is much misunderstanding regarding the current development stage of civil society, as well as about the real strength of various civil-society organizations.

Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit 2004* identifies three distinct forms of the nongovernmental sector in Belarus:

- a network of NGOs run by opposition individuals who are effectively denied or abstain from active participation in political life;
- (manifestly) non-political NGOs, such as humanitarian aid organizations; and
- NGOs that act as mouthpieces for the government and are subsidized directly by the state.

There are more than 2,000 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice, and little under half of them are active in the capital region.<sup>2</sup> Other sources claim the same number for non-registered organizations and initiatives.<sup>3</sup> Given the current official (registration) policy toward NGOs and the substantial support and assistance from international community, non-registered organizations are the main driving force within civil society, especially toward election-related programs.

*Human rights groups:* From the very beginning of the Lukashenko era, human rights organizations have been the most active defenders and documenters of human rights abuses, but have also generally contributed to the development of democracy. The most well-known organizations – apart from the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) – were born as a reaction to the authoritarian rule, including, for example Viasna (Spring) ‘96 or Charter ‘97. In particular, the establishment of Charter 97 was a unique moment, since it followed the collection of 100,000 signatures in support of the human rights agenda.

However, the most active and well-known human rights organizations became political and too connected to political parties and/or politics. This shift began before the important 2001 presidential elections, and the post-election wave of repression only confirmed it (although some would argue that the elections were the beginning of the end of this shift). While both

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<sup>1</sup> This outline only summarizes the most important players and is not intended to give a comprehensive analysis.

<sup>2</sup> The areas of activity of democratic and democratically active NGOs are divided among the following areas: education, culture, youth, social, human rights, sports, politics, local governance, religion, and minority problems. Most of the democratic NGOs are dependent on foreign grants to carry out their activities.

<sup>3</sup> Milinkevich, Ales, *The Political Parties and NGOs of Belarus and Election Campaigns*, Working Paper, Strategy Meeting: Youth and Cross-Border Programs Coordination, Krakow, Poland, organized by EEDC, June 23-24, 2003.

Viasna and BHC were engaged in non-partisan election monitoring in 2001, in 2004 both organizations participated in partisan poll watching<sup>4</sup>, however the shift in the strategy of foreign donors pushed in this direction. Obviously, this is a natural development in a (political) environment like that of Belarus. On the other hand, the leadership of the human rights organizations has been pursuing its political (partisan) and/or personal goals. One of the clear cases is Charter 97, which -- in keeping with its original human rights agenda – initially informed the international community about human rights abuses, but later their website turned into a (well-known, though heavily biased) portal on Belarusian politics. Since the leaders of Charter were the driving force behind the establishment of the political movement “Free Belarus” (with NGOs close to subsidiaries of Charter 97 including ZUBR and We Remember) in 2003<sup>5</sup>, there are good grounds to question the impartiality of the website with regard to its interpretation of domestic political affairs. In addition, compared to some other civil society organizations, Charter lacks state-wide structures and there was no effort to build any.

While BHC has perhaps the largest network in the country, Viasna has remained one of the most active organizations regarding reporting on human rights abuses based on international reporting standards. Also, Viasna has provided some legal assistance to political parties during election and referendum campaigning. One of its goals is to provide further legal assistance (legal consultation, help in filing court suits, complaints to the office of public prosecution, representation in court) to members of political structures facing persecution by the authorities. However, Viasna is traditionally believed to be close to the Belarusian Popular Front.

Last, but not least, one of the important legal organizations providing legal (human rights) analysis and legal aid is the Independent Society for Legal Research (ISLR). It manages to stay away from partisan politics. Its activity has been focused on providing legal aid (consultation and court representation) to a wide circle of NGOs. ISLR supports its own consultation center and a network of lawyers who work with NGOs. Currently ISLR is additionally developing monitoring and analytical activity on the issues of access to justice and access to information.

*Protest Organizations:* The widow of Gennadiy Karpenko has established the Karpenko Foundation – together with Zinaida Gonchar, Iryna Krasouskaya, and Svitlana Zavadskaya - in 2000 to focus on the plight of the disappeared<sup>6</sup> and other victims of political repression in Belarus. In the beginning, all the widows participated in protest actions; later, the most active of widows, Iryna Krasouskaya, together with Svitlana Zavadskaya, founded the civic initiative “We Remember”. At the outset, the initiative worked mainly with the United Civic Party, since most of the disappeared were the members of this party. In 2003, the initiative supported and joined the European Coalition/Free Belarus. While “We Remember” has organized protest actions (together with UCP and more recently with ZUBR) in Minsk, its main activity is advocating/lobbying the Belarus case abroad, especially in the United States.

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<sup>4</sup> BHC monitored the elections for Valerij Frolov (Respublika, later BSDP NG), Viasna served for the 5+ Coalition.

<sup>5</sup> Free Belarus became part of the European Coalition/Free Belarus, the second partisan coalition running in the 2004 parliamentary elections beside 5+. The European Coalition filled 35 registered candidates for the parliamentary race compared to 116 of 5+. All candidates of the European Coalition were of BSDP NG.

<sup>6</sup> For more about the disappeared persons, see <http://www.ucpb.org/eng/library/weremember/>

In Serbia, Ukraine, or Georgia the most important protest organizations are those gathering active youth. However, compared to Serbia or Ukraine, the youth structures dedicated to protest strategies in Belarus have lagged behind their counterparts in strategy, action, and structures/human resources. The Ukrainian elections just increased the attention given to these structures. The Young Front, originally the youth fraction of the Belarusian Popular Front, is one of the oldest youth and street protest organizations. Young Front was the first organization that tried to implement non-violent resistance in Belarus. After internal crisis (and conflict with its senior partner, the Belarusian Popular Front) in 2003, it fractured and part of it transformed into a political ‘coalition’ (more precisely a movement) – the Young Belarus Coalition - with scant structures and popular support. Part remained faithful to the senior party and is currently seeking to rebuild its youth wing. The demonstrations on October 18 and 19, however, showed the real roots and strength of the organization, since Young Front people (and its leader Pavel Sevrynets) were one of the driving forces behind these protests. After the referendum, observers noted a certain renaissance of Young Front, since a number of young people (those who joined the newly formed ZUBR prior to 2001) moved back to their original organization. In addition, Young Front is engaged in better cooperation talks with the unregistered Freedom Party (lead by Vysotsky), a highly radical youth structure. While Sevrynets might be in a position to again channel the energies and efforts of more radically-minded activist youth, the BPF has also taken steps to re-build and re-vitalize its youth wing.

ZUBR was designed in January 2001, using youth movements in Slovakia and particularly the Serbian OTPOR as a model. For a short period of time, in 2001 it was one of the strongest and most well-known organizations in Belarus. After the 2001 elections ZUBR failed to carry out institutional reform (decentralization of its structures, and substantive independence from Charter structures) and was investigated for non-compliance in use of funds by the US. As the result of the failed reform attempt, and failure to develop a progressive long-term strategy, many regional leaders left the organizations. The activities of the organization were reduced to increasing awareness regarding the disappeared persons and to some small street actions. While Zubr claims to have still more than 1,000 members, according to some estimates the number of active members reaches only several dozen, concentrated mainly in Minsk and Borisov, effectively making it a marginalized organization. Nevertheless, ZUBR became one of the leaders of the demonstration of October 18, 2004, though observers noted the protesters were the usual opposition crowds. So far ZUBR - with its high name recognition - has not been able to add anything surprising to its usual “black and white” protest strategy.

Because of the aforementioned name recognition, a few more words of explanation regarding Zubr are necessary. In 2001 Zubr’s main focus was to mobilize young people, distribute alternative information, and win fear of repression through humor before the presidential elections – following closely the OTPOR model. The summer and fall of 2001 witnessed well-designed stickers and leaflets and political performances. A network of volunteers/activists was developed to distribute up to a reported one million copies of information material. After the elections, the activities of the civil sector generally slowed down. ZUBR’s close relationship with Charter 97 became more open and explicit. In 2001 Charter 97 picked up on the theme of the disappeared people. Zubr joined in actions to hold silent vigils in the streets with portraits of the disappeared. In 2002 Zubr started to participate actively in the political demonstrations of the opposition and keep up mostly with the events that are organized by the other political players (i.e. Kurapaty, Dziady). The variety of actions narrowed to demonstrations and chains of people holding portraits of the disappeared, graffiti, and white-red-white flags flying in different places. In the elections year of 2004, Zubr

supported Charter's referendum campaign "Say NO to Lukashenko", but again failed come up with anything original. The actions that took place throughout the year were actions in support of disappeared politicians and arrested businessmen, flying of white-red-white flags, and distribution of material before the elections. During the election campaigns Zubr actively supported certain candidates, especially giving out Valerij Frolov's election material. They associate themselves with the European Coalition/Free Belarus and especially with Charter 97. The press-releases of Zubr mention overwhelmingly these two organizations and emulate their actions.

*Think Tanks:* There is good expertise and reasonably solid institutional background concentrated in several think tanks and NGOs in Belarus. Their studies are met with high interest in civil society and among the intellectual elite. The capacity of think tanks has been proven by the exit poll project for the 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections, when the two local sociological institutes (Independent Institute for Socio-Economical Issues/IISEPS and NOVAK Agency) cooperated with the Gallup Organizations in implementing the survey. However, the think tank community is fragmented, with no strong and structural cooperation, and with a clear lack of targeted PR and outreach strategy. In addition, their products are quite limited; available analyses usually provide useful data (at a fee), but contain poor interpretation and almost no policy recommendations or assessment of prevailing trends. There is a great lack of foreign policy, social and labor issues, and security studies in the current Belarus framework, although for foreign policy it is important to mention the Minsk Analytical Group<sup>7</sup> as one of the positive examples; the same is the case for the International Institute for Policy Studies in the area of security studies.

Formation of common academic and political discourse is complicated by poor communication among key actors and prevailing deep internal divisions within elites, as well as civil society at large. To a large extent it reflects different understanding of Belarusian state and national identity – and personal conflicts. Such divisions lead to fragmentation of expert groups, and little knowledge of projects or publications in some other political/institutional environs. This situation inevitably plays into hands to the presidential administration.

Think tanks can play a more important role in Belarusian society if they get closer and start serious cooperation with civil society organizations and/or aggressive public outreach campaigns that would be most effectively run with the help of civic organizations. Reasons for the current rather non-cooperative trend vary, but as most important one can mention the differing developmental paths of think tanks and civil society organizations. The strongest and most highly structured think tanks come from the academic environment, with very little connection to civil society. Loose expert networks have not yet built up structures and remain a "circle of experts and friends" with little impact on society.<sup>8</sup> There is lack of understanding of public policy in Belarus, and of the possible public education efforts of think tanks and analytical centers. Since there is no access to state media and "alternative"/independent

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<sup>7</sup> The Minsk Analytical Group, together with the Warsaw-based Batory Foundation, issued a series of publication covering Belarus and its foreign policy tendency (both toward Russia and the EU). The most important is the publication "Belarus: Reform Scenarios" from 2003, which contains the findings of Belarusian and foreign experts from a variety of fields who took part in the Foundation's European Choice for Belarus project. The experts analyze political, economic, social and educational reform in Belarus from a democratic and European perspective.

<sup>8</sup> While "official" civil society organizations retain their mass (Soviet) character, "alternative" civil society groups have a strong pro-independence and pro-European character (using the Belarusian language and European integration as main issues). This is a very important trend, however the majority of civil society organizations supporting this trend has become partisan, as well.

media is persecuted, other (direct) methods of communication should be developed to raise awareness of current trends in Belarusian society.

*NGO Umbrella Organizations:* The biggest umbrella organization is the NGO Assembly, which was created in 1997 on the wave of the first repressions against NGOs<sup>9</sup>. The NGO Assembly played an important role in defending NGOs during the repression, by implementing the so-called SOS Third Sector campaign. After the campaign, the Assembly tried to run a large-scale service for NGOs and in 2000 announced its role in coordinating the non-partisan mobilization campaign during the 2001 presidential elections. Although civil society had financial resources for its campaign activities, coordination of its actions was clearly lacking. Prior to the 2001 elections, there were two (consolidation) centers set up: the Coordination Council of Democratic Forces (CCDF)<sup>10</sup> primarily charged with selecting the single opposition candidate, and “Regional Belarus”, the coalition of regional democratic coalitions of parties and public organizations.<sup>11</sup> CCDF turned out to be indecisive enough, conducted endless meetings, and lost its authority and initiative.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that one of main declared goals of civil society - high voter turnout - was attained, the feeling of failure (especially the selection of a “bad” opposition candidate – Goncharik) has been both the pervading external assessment as well as cause of internal depression until the 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum. This depression and lack of resources marked the post-2001 period, which was also a period of stagnation in the life of the Assembly, connected with searching for new ideas and agenda, but also facing new attacks by the administration. A new period seems to have begun with the Assembly Congress in May 2004. The working groups of the Assembly prepared various strategies and provided well needed discussion and tactics toward the 2004 elections (although actual implementation lagged behind the planning). Representatives of around 200 NGOs<sup>13</sup> joined the 5+ Coalition, however many organizations claimed larger transparency of Assembly decisions (especially in sensitive political questions) would be needed. Currently, the Assembly lists around 400 NGOs as its members. Its status as one of the most important possible civil society “multipliers” in Belarus, much will depend on the willingness, current development trend, and capacity of the Assembly to mobilize its members by defining its role and strategy and consolidate its position.

*Social Service Delivery Organizations:* Social service organizations in Belarus most commonly operate on a local basis (local and regional registered organizations), however there are some organizations working on national level. Activities of social organizations vary from resource-center activities (Belarusian Association of Social Workers), to protection of rights and interests of citizens (Center for Social Innovations), work with children and youth (Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs, Belarusian Committee Chernobyl Children), work with the handicapped (Republican Association of Wheelchair Users, Belarusian Youth Association Different-Equal, Belarusian Association of Help of Handicapped Children and Youth, Belarusian Public Association of Sight Handicapped, etc). Although they could play a

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<sup>9</sup> See more in the section on “Repression against NGOs”

<sup>10</sup> CCDF comprised most of the democratic parties, independent and free labor unions, NGO Assembly, Charter 97 and representatives of the regions of Belarus

<sup>11</sup> Regional Belarus had more than one third of total number of votes within the CCDF due to presence of the representatives from the regions backing the candidacy of Siamjon Domash

<sup>12</sup> See Milinkevich, op.cit. The five potential candidates (Domash, Goncharik, Chygir, Kozlovski and Kaliakin) took the initiative and they decided about the single candidate and further election strategy. Most civil society organizations connected to NGO Assembly and Regional Belarus did not agree with the selected candidate, which marked their performance in the campaign.

<sup>13</sup> The individual support supposed to save the registration of the (participating) organizations

more important role in the regions, their lack of interest and focus on communication and linkage of their activities, as well as the very cautious and sometimes suspicious attitude (due to the fear of the authorities) makes them less inclined to cooperate with democratically oriented 'civil society', which is generally (correctly) perceived as oppositionist.

*Resource Centers (regional):* The Belorussian Association of Resource Centers (BARC) network has been functioning since 1998. According to its own information, it still comprises 61 organizations representing 61 towns and villages throughout Belarus<sup>14</sup>. Resources are known to comprise information, education, legal protection, technical services, consulting services, fundraising, and search for potential partners, NGO data base, and analytical studies. The aim of the activities of the network has undergone definite changes, i.e. at the initial stage it served primarily as an incubator for civic initiatives; the second stage aimed at establishment of close cooperation among the third sector and political parties, labor unions, and mass media. The current key goal of the BARC is to create local elites and establish cooperation among the three aforementioned actors. The BARC was known to have a well developed system of information exchange (BARC news), however the news service has been suspended since 2002. BARC has its own printing facilities in around 10 regions, and partnership-based relations with hundreds of regional and local NGOs. BARC provided independent mass media as well as public initiatives from more than 50 towns of Belarus with a free access to internet. Despite the fact that it is one of the most organized civil networks in Belarus, it is hard to evaluate the real current strength of the organization. Like the majority of NGOs in Belarus, it greatly suffered in the wake of the 2001 elections from an internal crisis and external lack of funds. BARC was engaged in the parliamentary election campaign with the aim to build up regional and local coalitions. The campaign showed BARC branches are active in the regional level mainly in Gomel and Brest. BARC also has strong local/city branches in Borisov, Grodna, Hlubokaya, and Molodechna. The parliamentary elections (the campaign had regional character due to the 110 elections districts), however, were unable to test the national capacity of the network. BARC cooperated with political parties, with the different regional and local branches having developed cooperation ties with different organizations, in Grodna regions it is BNF, in Vitebsk with BNF and the Social Democratic Gromada, in Gomel with UCP. A fact telling of their political strength is that BARC nominated Semjon Domas as presidential candidate in 2001, however subsequently refused to take political responsibility for the campaign, however that the mobilization campaign was largely implemented through their networks.

*Youth Organizations:* One of the most positive political developments in the current Belarus is the growing number of young leaders/politicians. Many of them registered their initiative groups to gain nomination as candidates in the parliamentary elections of 2004. From the local government elections in March 2003, where significant number of young candidates were elected as councilors, young candidates have become a new and growing factor in Belarus domestic politics, though one often unmentioned by established party leaders. Many have managed to establish themselves firmly in their home districts as local authorities and are working to build up their track records (as local councilors for example – though sometimes simply as 'civic leaders'), and are advancing to the position of regional leaders. This is what political structures in Belarus currently are most in need of. In the ideal case – as regional leaders - they could fulfill the role of communication channels for the impending presidential race. With their growing influence within political party structures (especially the Belorussian Popular Front) is based on their more professional preparation, many observers

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<sup>14</sup> According to its own resources 7 branches in Minsk region, 8 in Brest region, 10 in Gomel region, 10 in Vitebsk region and 13 centers in Mogilev region.

think that in the middle term perspective they might be able to challenge the regime more effectively than the current leadership.

Student movements (the Belarusian Student Association and the Youth Information Center) have been fighting for their identity, character of programs, and with decreased membership after losing their registration subsequent to being active in mobilization campaigns in the 2001 presidential elections. Due to the loss of registration among other factors, they have been unable to provide a large-scale alternative or ideological counterweight to the growing BRDSM (so-called Lukamol). Both organizations envisage mainly service oriented activities after being engaged in election related programs, however, the actual implementation is far from what Belarusian students would need. On the other hand, any activities have been meeting with great obstacles from authorities (after a concert organized by BSA in one of the clubs of Minsk, the club was forced to close down by authorities). Nevertheless, BSA has produced a large number of active students and educated activists for civil society and democratic political parties throughout its existence.

Before the parliamentary elections of October 2004 a significant part of (political and non-political) youth groups took part in an informal youth network. During the seminars and gatherings (organized by EEDC, Poland) there was agreement that meeting and broad consultations (to pull social-service oriented youth organizations into the process for example) among other youth organizations in their respective regions should take place in Belarus. The steps defined so far include the need to come up with a list of 50 “desires” of young people in Belarus (ie. job security, access to international student exchange programs, etc.) supplemented by their proposed course of action. There is also general agreement that this movement be as broad and inclusive as possible and will start with its activities after the elections. Given the fact that the next (very important) elections are presidentials, and taking into consideration the crisis in the existing (youth-based) protest organizations (Zubr, Young Front), there will be a growing need for a new (political) youth movement in the country.

*Women’s Organizations:* Women’s organizations were born on the most populous base of civil society in Belarus, and among the most popular membership based organizations. Since membership based organizations could be only state-run or controlled, currently there are four important women’s organizations in Belarus. These organizations (like most) are rather project based, and their impact is limited in the current political environment. Their projects usually lack better outreach strategies, however, more attention from authorities could endanger the very existing of the organizations (at least the registration).

One of these is the Women’s Private Institute Envila founded in 1994 for the purpose of creating high-standard education for women. Apart from educational activities, the organization provides psychological aid to women in crisis situations and other consultations. Another organization is the Belarusian Young Women’s Christian Association (part of IWCA network) working to protect the rights of young women, and organizing predominantly educational activities on women’s rights, as well as violence against women. The public association “Belarusian Organization of Working Women” (BOWW) was created in 1996 with the mission of increasing participation of women in social initiatives. Among the women’s organizations BOWW is perhaps the most active and cooperates with state and civil society structures (projects of long-term cooperation with human rights organizations), and international organizations. BOWW has information centers in twelve cities conducting educational activities. BOWW is partnering with the Independent Labor Unions of Belarus and international labor organizations providing legal aid in Belarus. The activities of BOWW

– as a general regressive development trend has taken hold around the country – have decreased along with its membership.

Last, but not least, the “Independent Democratic Women’s Movement” (IDWM, former Christian-Democratic Women’s Movement) aims to change the status of women in society by increasing self-conscience and initiative. The IDWM supports protection of women rights, assistance to the politics of gender equality, and democratization of society. IDWM conducts regular research, monitoring women’s movements in Belarus, and focuses especially on political participation by women, as well as on domestic violence in Belarus and research of legislation on women’s rights.

*Non-Governmental Labor Unions:* These have been united by the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Labor Unions, the latter comprising the Free Belarusian Labor Union (FBLU) and the Belarusian Independent Labor Union (BILU). The FBLU unites about 6,000 members, although in 1995 it comprised more than 10,000 active members. This organization has a large number of smaller affiliates scattered all over the country. The BILU comprises about 10,000 members, and its largest branches are located at the enterprises of the chemical and mining industry, i.e. in Salihorsk (2,500 members), Navapolatsk (1,500), Grodna (1,000) and Mazyr (1,000).<sup>15</sup> However, independent trade unions are under ongoing attack from 2000 and a new Labor Code has come into force that practically outlawed the organization of strikes protecting workers’ rights. Government interference in trade union affairs escalated dramatically in 2001, after trade union leader Vladimir Goncharik ran against Lukashenko in the presidential race.

### **Repression Against NGOs:**

The first wave of repression<sup>16</sup>, dating from 1997, was directed against international organizations. The Soros Fund – which had provided until that year the greatest financial support for civil society – was the first to be closed, followed by the Children of Chernobyl, and the East-West Center of Strategic Initiatives. Since that time only a handful of foreign organizations has been able to maintain an official physical presence in the country, and that is mainly limited to humanitarian aid organizations. Civil society reacted with the establishment of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic Belarusian Non-Governmental Associations (NGO Assembly). The Assembly grouped together organizations interested in maintaining independent Belarus (that time the clear goal mainly of the Belarusian Popular Front), and promoting integration of Belarus into the European community (or more accurately staying on the path of post-Soviet transition). According to NGO Assembly sources, within a year the number its members grew from 250 to 500, and by 1998 the Assembly was active in all regions of the country.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Milinkevich, Ales, *The Political Parties and NGO’s of Belarus and Election Campaigns*, Working Paper, Strategy Meeting: Youth and Cross-Border Programs Coordination, Krakow, Poland, organized by EEDC, June 23-24, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> A detailed English overview of the repression is provided by Rouda Uladzimir, *The Third Wave, or the regime’s current tactics in dealing with independent NGOs*, 2003, *Belarusian Review*, Volume 15, No.4, <http://www.belreview.cz/articles/2692.html>, and Chavusov, Yuriy, *Liquidation of Civil Society Structures*, [http://www.eedc.org.pl/eng/www/glosy/tabela\\_ngo.htm](http://www.eedc.org.pl/eng/www/glosy/tabela_ngo.htm). However, none of the analyses offers solutions for the current situation. Some of the possible role of NGOs regarding elections is outlined by the *Assembly Digest* magazine (published by the Belarusian Assembly of NGOs) “NGOs and Elections” December 2003-January 2004, <http://www.belngo.info/cgi-bin/e.pl?d=digest2&i=0>

<sup>17</sup> Rouda, op. cit.

The second wave began with Presidential Decree No.2 in January 1999. The decree called for re-registration of all NGOs, political parties, and labor unions. A special commission was formed within the presidential administration to oversee the re-registrations. The NGO Assembly reacted with a campaign in support of NGOs called "SOS Third Sector"<sup>18</sup> including legal assistance to provincial NGOs; informing the international community; and lawyers (primarily those from the Independent Society of Legal Research) assisting in initiating court cases in defense of various NGOs, regardless of their affiliation, against illegal actions taken by the authorities. The total number of registered NGOs fell from 2,500 to 1,300, however the most active NGOs were saved, at least for a while.<sup>19</sup>

The third wave started after the 2001 presidential elections: many NGOs were closed by the authorities because of their activities in the campaign (non-partisan, get-out-the-vote campaign, election monitoring, etc). In particular, the year 2003 witnessed a massive "cleanup" of Belarusian NGOs. The quantity of warnings officially issued to NGOs that year was six times higher than in 2002.<sup>20</sup> The campaign resulted in 51 public associations (NGOs) being closed by courts decisions<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, the ruling bodies of 78 associations took decisions of self-liquidation. In the majority of cases the decisions were taken upon "recommendations" made by judicial bodies.<sup>22</sup> The most active youth organizations and crucial regional resource centers lost their registration as part of the campaign by the authorities. Importantly, most of these NGOs are still active, although without registration working in underground conditions and cut off from much international funding. However, due to fear, but also due to lack of support from the international community, they did not become active either during the 2003 local government elections or the 2004 parliamentary elections and national referendum. While many NGO activists (especially young people) were active in both campaigns as volunteers for opposition candidates, the number of activists in 2004 shrank to one quarter of the number in the 2001 presidential election<sup>23</sup> campaign, mainly due to the lack of activities and resources of NGOs.

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<sup>18</sup> The campaign followed an earlier Slovak example (from 1996) against practice of authoritarian regime toward NGOs, in: Rouda, op.cit

<sup>19</sup> At the end of 1999, the Assembly numbered 700 members, of which one third, while not officially registered, was nevertheless still active.

<sup>20</sup> An NGO can be closed after receiving two warnings from the Ministry of Justice for example for technical reasons. During the first ten months of 2003, nine NGOs were liquidated by the court decisions and two others received official warnings that could lead to the liquidation at any moment. Reasons for closures are mostly technical. For example, in the case of the human rights organization "Spring 96" the liquidation order was based on the fact that it provided legal assistance to individuals who were not members of the organization. The first closures concentrated on the election monitoring NGOs (Spring 96 and Belarusian Helsinki Committee) and on the NGO resource centers that provided services to the regional NGOs (Varuta in Baranovichy, Civic Initiatives in Gomel, Center for Youth Initiatives Kontur in Vitebsk, Ratusha in Grodno).

<sup>21</sup> The Agency for Regional Development "Varuta" (Baranovichy), the Civic Association "Ratusha" (Grodna), the Civic Association "Civic Initiatives" (Gomel), the Center "Vezha" (Brest). In addition since 2002 the following youth organizations: "Hart" (Gomel) "Kontur" (Vitebsk), Association of Belarusian Students, Youth Information Center, United Civic Party Youth, and Malady Front (Young Front) have lost their official status. These organizations were especially active in the presidential campaign, but also were able to build a solid constituency (coalition of democratic forces) in their particular regions. Court actions against the most active legal assistance organizations, with Legal Assistance to the Populace, the Independent Society of Legal Research, the Human Rights Center Viasna, the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, the Republic-wide Charitable Civic Association Helping Hand completing the list of de-registered organizations before the parliamentary elections and the nationwide referendum in October 17, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Svedcanni perasledu belaruskich njauradavyh arhanizacyj, Minsk, 2004. p. 83-84.

<sup>23</sup> More see "Belarus Before Voting: Politics and Society", Center for Political Education/Pontis Foundation, p. 6.

## **Civil Society at the Crossroads:**

The task facing Belarusian civil society is clear after the referendum and the parliamentary elections (held on October 17, 2004): to counteract the widespread apathy and mobilize citizens for change. This will be not an easy task given the current working conditions<sup>24</sup> and the current capacity and developmental level of NGOs in Belarus.

Despite the very difficult atmosphere in which the NGOs are forced to work, they have played and will play a major role in election campaigns. Because political figures do not have access to the wider mass media and lack effective and widespread regional structures, information campaigns and especially door-to-door campaigns carried out by the NGOs will be the main source of getting the message through for candidates.

Civil society organizations and activists played a very important role in the 2001 presidential elections, when one of the main goals of the 2001 campaign (civic mobilization) was met, with turnout reaching 84%. However, NGOs were not able to target the actual mood of different layers of the voters, and finding clear and targeted messages was a big. In addition, the role of NGOs during the single candidate selection was viewed by many observers as problematic, although the problem has persisted since 2001: lack of communication and fragmentation of the democratic opposition as a whole, including civil society.

The 2004 campaign showed a different picture. Most active civil society actors and organizations formally joined the 5+ coalition (according to 5+ around 200 NGOs announced support for the coalition). However, beside declarative policy, NGOs played a smaller role in the 2004 parliamentary elections and reacted to the referendum too late<sup>25</sup>. In a few regions (for example Grodna, Borisov, and Gomel) NGOs played an important role in building up effective coalitions around democratic candidates and served as the main communication channels toward citizens in the regions. The success of such coalitions and the work of NGOs is actually showed by the tracking polls results<sup>26</sup> measuring the awareness of the political program of the democratic opposition. The process of successful coalition building, however, is not an election related tasks. The key elements of the case of Grodno or Gomel are a long-term approach and strong personality/civil society leader with the necessity assertiveness.

The connections between civil society and opposition (especially at the level of human resource sharing) is too obvious for most of the citizens, and largely used by the official propaganda, which effectively labels everything that is not state-run or owned (including NGOs and independent media) negatively. NGOs have joined both the European

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<sup>24</sup> On the public level there are several obstacles to the work of the NGOs. Lack of traditions in public participation and low awareness of NGO work contributes to the low participation base in the activities of NGOs. Governmental pressure and fear of problems that might accompany active participation in NGOs that might be viewed as oppositional further decreases the base of participation. Belarusian society is highly divided and politicized, and any NGO activity can be identified as oppositional. In addition, the realization by the government of the hidden potential of the NGOs resulted in a crackdown on the most active NGOs. The government possesses many levers on NGOs, including regulation of the flow of funds, since many NGOs are dependant on foreign funding.<sup>24</sup> Intimidation is regularly employed against the organizations and their members. Arbitrary inspections are common in Belarus. Physical intimidation is often used against individual members of the NGOs. Since most of the educational institutions are state-run, the fear of expulsion is a simple tool.

<sup>25</sup> Except perhaps the Commission of Free Elections (led by Kolas and Voitovich), which announced the exit poll results on October 17, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Prepared by IRI/Gallup Baltic Survey throughout August-September 2004

Coalition/Free Belarus<sup>27</sup> and 200 entities of civil society supported the 5+ Coalition before the elections. According to expectations, many of those individuals lost their positions in politics or in society will try to influence the political situation through newly established NGOs.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, based on the experience from 2001 and 2004, it will be crucial to keep some distance between civil society and the political parties in both campaigning and candidate selection. One of the clear signs that domestic forces may think in the same way is the declaration of 9 important political parties on November 20, 2004 in Lithuania, in which there was agreement on forms of cooperation regarding the presidential elections expected in 2006.<sup>29</sup>

Human rights groups in Belarus will obviously pursue human rights and democracy issues (as political issues); however, it would be very important for other NGOs to find non-political issues that matter to people the most. One such issue could be small-scale, regional-based children and youth projects (e.g. summer and winter camps, exhibitions, and travel for children, although currently Lukashenko is seeking to curb this activity by limiting trips for children from the Chernobyl region, etc), which could improve the image of the third sector. In addition strengthening regional structures of civil society to build up effective civic dialogue with people will be a particularly important task before the presidential race. This communication channel need new faces with good communication skills, but also understanding of issue-based communication founded on local authority.

As Pontis reports and earlier policy papers<sup>30</sup> point out, the lack of alternative Western socio-cultural models reinforces the image of the current authoritarian regime. Official state propaganda compares Belarus with the East, offering obvious positive comparisons for Belarus. Therefore, Belarusian society should be brought to see comparisons with Western icons and models, so that society may gravitate towards similar values, but presented in such a manner so they do not seem 'foreign' and therefore inapplicable and by extension unattainable. Given the choice of existing models of society, there is a strong tendency to adapt to the regime and use all the benefits (that is, to choose materialistically) rather than to behave in accordance with a set of higher values.

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<sup>27</sup> European Coalition/Free Belarus (created on November 6, 2003) included the following organizations: the Women's Party "Nadzeja", Belarusian Women's Forum, Women's Coordinative Center, Women's Association "The Revival of the Fatherland", Belarusian Association of Women Jurists, Civil Initiative "We Remember" (Iryna Krasouskaya and Sviatlana Zavadskaya), Belarusian Branch of the Public Association "The European Movement", Belarusian Branch of the Public Association "The European Home, Republican Public Association "Private Property", Youth Center "Volat"(Barysau), Civil Initiative "Maladzechna Talaka"(Maladzechna), Ecological Civil Initiative "Terre Convention", Public Association "Young Social Democrats", Republican Businessmen's Strike Committee, Civil Initiative "The Belarusian Solidarity", International Fund named after Efrasinnia Polatskaya, Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada", Democratic Block "Free Belarus"

<sup>28</sup> One such organization could be Committee for Free and Fair Elections, led by former head of the Academy of Science Voitovich and Director of Jakub Kolas Lyceum Uladzimir Kolas. While the organization was active in informing about election violation and announcing the exit poll results on election/referendum night (October 17, 2004), its role in the post-election is rather dubious, especially in the wake of the single candidate issue. Other individuals – Piotr Kravchenko, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to Japan or Alexander Kozulin, former Head of the Belarus State University could create also disputes among the opposition by trying to stay away from domestic policymaking and looking for contact with foreign organizations, which could – in the short term– harm the current political integration. There is no doubt of the necessity of engagement of former prominents of the administration, however, it could create tension within the opposition.

<sup>29</sup> The declaration see at <http://www.ucpb.org/eng/>

<sup>30</sup> Policy Paper on Democratization and Civil Society of Belarus, Institute for Civic Diplomacy/Pontis Foundation, Bratislava, Slovakia, July 2004, [www.pontisfoundation.sk](http://www.pontisfoundation.sk)

Last, but not least, the task for the international community is to consolidate working conditions for civil society in Belarus and consider strategies/steps to ensure greater sustainability for (key) NGOs and allow new civic initiatives to emerge. Since many NGOs have lost their registration, international donors should consider their support schemes and perhaps amend the schemes according to local conditions.

### **A New Approach:**

Pontis, through the Slovak-Belarus Task Force: Civil Society Assistance project, is proposing a new approach in assisting Belarusian NGOs in the upcoming period. The methodology was prepared and effectively tested in Slovakia during the 2002 parliamentary elections<sup>31</sup>, when civil society through a similar assistance program was able to find ways to mobilize citizens during a period characterized by pervasive apathy toward politics. The aim of the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force is to put together a group of practitioners and scholars from Slovak and Belarus NGOs and think tanks to assist throughout 2005 to Belarus civil society to increase its impact on the society. The approach – with the main aim of researching the mood of society and finding effective issues and messages for civil society to use in targeting society – could be outlined by the following points:

- **Dissatisfaction:** One can't count only with the existing (and growing) dissatisfaction of the citizens, especially where the dissatisfaction with human rights abuses and complete lack of democratic rights is not a major factor in people's decisions. However, polls show major dissatisfaction with the current trend of the country, so the first step is to research the dissatisfaction, find its roots and objects.
- **Holders of Change:** The next step is to find the key layers of the society including the holders of messages, holders of information, and the holders of change in the context of the dissatisfaction. Pontis will use qualitative and quantitative research to identify these key layers of the society.
- **Information/Messages:** Based on the previous points, key issues/topics and related messages will be recommended by the expert group to civil society organizations. Crucial will be to increase the Western (cultural and social) icons, and topics not connected to official structures whatsoever. Finding issues, where official propaganda can not compete with civil society messages.
- **Better Acceptance of Civil Society:** In the end, the project aims to create conditions for more quality and well-targeted messages, and better acceptance of NGOs by Belarusian society.

The project does not aim to build a large coalition of NGOs, however, its activities might help to form effective coalitions and new initiatives or just revive those that already exist. One of the most important features of this assistance is to have possibilities of multiplication (Therefore, one of the project partners in Belarus will be the Assembly of Belarusian NGOs.) In addition, the Task Force through regular policy reports and updates will insist on accountability of civil society projects and information toward international community about needs and development of the civil society of Belarus.

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<sup>31</sup> By the Bratislava-based Institute of Public Affairs, Pontis partner organization