

Policy Paper on Democratization and Civil Society of Belarus

**Prepared by the team of the Slovak-Belarus Task Force,
An Initiative of the Institute for Civic Diplomacy/Pontis Foundation**

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Introduction:

On June 22, 2004 the Institute for Civic Diplomacy at the Pontis Foundation, together with the Minsk-based Independent Institute for Social and Economical Issues, organized a policy roundtable on the topic “Think Tanks and Public Relations.” The policy roundtable was organized as part of a Pontis project to assist think tanks and civil society in Belarus supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C.

This policy paper contains a summary of the most valuable findings and recommendations of the policy roundtable, as well as conclusions from subsequent meetings with representatives of the democratic opposition and civil society. While focusing on societal characteristics of Belarus, it also serves as an outline for the upcoming Slovak-Belarus Task Force, one of Pontis’ new projects. The report is divided into general observations, observations on civil society, the democratic opposition, and Belarus youth.

General Observations:

The Pontis team made three major observations on the current state of Belarusian society:

- There is strong fear of an uncertain future, change, and the repression that may follow.
- Apathy is widespread and general: “nothing is possible, nothing makes sense.”
- At the same time, there is growing need for and attention to the democratic modernization of society within the country

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 the uncertainty of the future.

The most striking aspect of the general mood is widespread apathy to the rule of President Lukashenka. This sentiment is most easily identifiable in the atmosphere surrounding the upcoming parliamentary elections (the outcome of which Lukashenka will most likely manipulate), but also in the overwhelming resignation to the belief that the president is powerful enough to do whatever he wishes. The lack of alternative Western socio-cultural models reinforces the image of the current authoritarian regime. 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. Freedom, democracy, and Europe are all abstractions that are generally unclear to the overwhelming majority of Belarusians. The lack of comprehension of these ideas inhibits them from fueling civic activism. There is a strong historical tendency of citizens to follow social demagoguery, which reinforces the strong social base of Lukashenka's regime.

Civil Society:

Since Belarus is largely isolated from international organizations, exchange programs are the main source of capacity development for civil society in Belarus. Both civil society and political parties believe that it is important to improve communication to acquire better knowledge on successes achieved by other countries and to understand how they were achieved. During in-depth consultations with the Pontis team, democratic processes became more comprehensible to our Belarus counterparts, and they were able to identify their role in creating a similar process in Belarus.

The current connection of civil society with (opposition) politics and their lack of impact on society create a communication vacuum in Belarus. Both political parties and civil society organizations lack stronger public outreach drive, which decreases the overall impact of the civil society.

Political parties are only searching to define their relationship with think tanks, and think tanks (and other analytical centers) do the same towards civil society. Additionally neither think tanks nor political parties "listen" to society, therefore democratic forces use less social messages. Further integration of think tanks with civil society organizations and strengthening social analysis would give better foundation for much needed civic education activities. Think tanks and analytical centers have the ability to reshape the focus of civil society and guide them to identify the critical society group, analyze it, and through activities break the stereotypes (fear of the future and change) and popularize new socio-cultural icons.

The influence of Western socio-cultural icons and values is absent. Official state propaganda compares Belarus with the East, offering obvious positive comparisons for Belarus. Therefore, Belarusian society should see comparisons with Western icons and models, so that society may gravitate towards similar values.

Democratic Forces:

Ten years of Lukashenka's rule in Belarus has had a negative and long-lasting impact on the country's political abilities. Politicians tend to view society as a general mass, and do not distinguish potentially useful target groups. In addition, opposition parties' policymaking tends to be influenced by the people's fearful reaction towards platforms based on values-based issues, such as freedom, democracy or Europe. The lack of civil engagement and collaboration with political parties not only limits policy initiatives, but also reinforces the cyclical lack of cohesion and partnership.

The democratic opposition has a tendency to react and respond to Lukashenka, rather than listening to the general public, which limits developing originality and establishing political ground it can call its own. The current campaign of 5+ revolves around social issues, identified by research and polling, however in our observation, more original communication methods would be worth trying to broaden the social base of the democratic opposition. After the parliamentary elections, the democratic opposition will need to develop a new policy

initiative from original values-based issues, which targets and engages specific population groups, as well as the broader civil society.

It is difficult for opposition political parties to enlist needed (campaign) professionals due to the illegality of their work conditions. As a result, the democratic opposition lacks the necessary creativity and independent, bipartisan feedback to strengthen its policies.

Youth:

Belarus youth lives in a society where the idea that “nothing is allowed/permitted” is reinforced in all aspects of their lives. The biggest challenge here is to address and overcome their fear of repression, as well as their mistrust of political organizations. Youth initiatives are crucial, since they encourage non-political participation and activism in non-political issues. Recently, Studentskaya Dumka implemented a “self-made man” campaign, an important step in this direction.

While young people seemingly lack interest in politics, they do have tendency to overestimate politics and not think about other alternative creative sources for change. In accordance with their mental patterns, many only expect politicians to provide alternatives rather than contributing their own input.

Most young people have a materialistic understanding of the West. Therefore, new youth initiatives should increase the numbers of activities linked to cultural sub-groups, and create small networks to encourage critical thinking. The common key title for youth could be something along the lines of “Open Your Mind.”

Slovak-Belarus Task Force:

To address the afore-mentioned problems, the authors of this paper and the Institute for Civic Diplomacy at the Pontis Foundation propose the establishment of the Slovak Belarus Task Force. The Task Force will create a more comprehensive forum to enhance exchange programs between the two countries, utilize Slovak transition experience in Belarus, and generate a new communication policy between Belarus and the enlarged European Union. In order to strengthen the democratic process and civil society in Belarus, the authors propose the following five steps for the Task Force Working Group on Civil Society:

- Identify critical target groups that have the capacity to promote change in Belarusian society.
- Identify the feelings, frustration, expectations, and hopes of these target groups.
- Break the existing stereotypes within well-defined target groups through new civil society organization projects.
- Identify and popularize Western socio-cultural ideas.
- Define the role of political organizations, civil society and media, and aid in the formation of a working partnership among them.

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