



The Expert Community in Belarus: Entering the mainstream

(Report on the current state and trends within the analytical community in Belarus)

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Introduction

The Pontis Foundation presents a fresh report in its efforts to monitor developmental changes within the expert community in Belarus. Analysis is based on in-depth interviews with prominent independent Belarusian analysts carried out throughout 2007. This study is a follow up to the report of 2006, and will examine the main challenges the analytical community is currently facing. The Pontis Foundation aims to offer possible recommendations to strengthen the position of independent experts within the wider society, facilitating their return into the policy-making process in Belarus. .

Background

It is a well-known fact that state policies, at the very least obstruct the work of most of the would-be institutionalized analytical structures within Belarus. The expert community faces many obstacles in operating freely, let alone promoting ideas or publishing work. Hostile constraints placed upon the community have resulted in a difficult existence, which has had an enormous impact on the abilities to work openly. Legal constraints on NGO registration have meant many have been forced to change their working practices entirely. For example, the 'International Institute for Political Science' lost its state registration in 2004. Since then it has worked on an informal basis only. Likewise, the 'Belarusian Centre for Constitutionalism and Comparative Legal Studies' has also followed a similar path after it lost its registration in 2004. As a result, a number of analysts have moved abroad whilst many of those who have stayed have shifted their attention on producing work on an individual basis. 'Nase Mnenie', 'NOVAK laboratories' and the 'Institute for Privatization and Management' are among those few which still continue their work in Belarus legally. However, getting permission for conducting a public opinion poll or similar activities is lengthy and complicated, while participation in research not approved by authorities may result in the termination of an employee's contract.

On the other hand, successful attempts at coordination and integration platforms have been made. The newly-formed 'Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies' (BISS) was inaugurated in Kyiv in autumn 2007. There are great expectations surrounding BISS in terms of positioning itself as a public policy platform, with the immediate challenge to rise up to these hopes. Another important actor has been the European Humanities University (EHU). The EHU now faces the challenge of overcoming its orientation towards academics in order to provide more room for expert analysis. The 'Minsk Analytical Group' and the 'Lazarski School of Commerce and Law' in Warsaw are other examples of functioning networks of Belarusian experts.

Current Framework: External Pressures Leave their Mark

Enhancing their position as a significant actor and increasing their public visibility remains the single most significant task faced by Belarusian experts. But the challenges that obstruct that path are numerous. And it is to these challenges that this report must turn to first.

Official State Institutions

The official state analytical institutions maintain a closed character. The 'Information and Analysis Centre' working rigidly under the Administration of the President remains the most important of all state analytical centers. Some work by academics is published in 'Belarusskaja Dumka', a magazine published by the Administration of the President. However, analyses produced by the state-run centers are sporadic and apolitical in nature. Few who dare to be critical have lost contracts with state institutions. A periodical 'Planeta' represented a novel attempt to publish anti-state analytical findings on a monthly basis. But the Editor-in-chief left in 2007 and became Deputy Director of the 'Information and Analysis Centre', leaving 'Planeta' a mere tabloid. In a significant message for the future, Nina Špak, Director of the 'Information and Analysis Centre' has recently signaled the state's intention to further intensify its support of the pro-state analytical structures and their activities.

Academic Community

The academic environment, represented by various universities and the National Academy of Sciences (NSA), is not entirely monolithic. Nevertheless, international isolation as well as fear plays a great role in determining the work of experts working in these institutions. As a result, their public outreach or communication towards the public remains limited. There is no international relations or political science research at the NSA, while university research on these fields tends to be theoretical with very few publications aimed at a larger audience. The majority of social scientists remain bound to teach courses on state ideology. Contacts with independent experts do exist on a personal basis, although these are not systematic. A few independent analysts still continue to teach (or rather are tolerated) within universities.

Contacts with official institutions

According to the opinions of our respondents, as a result of state monitoring of independent research, the analysts themselves remain objects of political persecution. On the other hand, our research showed persecution is less intense than it has been in the past. State institutions communicate with independent analytical centers in an ad-hoc fashion, mainly through government-supported institutes. This is especially true in the case of economic institutions that function within the National Bank of Belarus or the Ministry of Economy.

Political Party 'Expertise'

Tension still continues to dominate relations between independent experts and opposition political parties. This is due to the fact that opposition parties draw mainly upon internal experts who tend to act more in their role as party members. The expertise of party analysts, (especially in the case of the 'United Democratic Forces'), is often questioned by independent experts. A rare exception exists within the 'For Freedom Movement', where cooperation with political scientists runs smoother.

Challenges from within: Facing the mirror

Division lines among Belarusian experts in general follow the pro-regime vs. anti-regime standard. Interestingly, most interviewed analysts argued that the gap identified in previous Pontis Foundation reports between Russian- and Belarusian- speaking independent experts is decreasing and not as relevant as it used to be. This is partly due to the constricted space for objective information in Belarus. Opportunities to publish are so rare that the question of the

language of a publication becomes irrelevant and often, both Russian and Belarusian texts appear in the same journals and books.

However, two other divisions continue to define the independent analytical community today. Firstly, there exists a natural line between the different affiliations of Belarusian experts who align themselves with the various factions within the democratic opposition. Secondly, traditional ideological cleavages continue to play a role. As some interviewed by the Pontis Foundation argued, this line is connected to divisions over the geopolitical position of Belarus (pro-European orientation vs. close cooperation with Russia). At the same time, following the 2006 energy row with Russia, a growing social consensus on the independence of Belarus emerged, which has decreased the salience of this line of. Likewise, this development also reflects the fact that independent experts are not viewing the EU as a serious actor at this stage.

The curse of the democratization theme

The ability of the current regime to hold its grip on power has resulted in a long-term focus of the majority of experts on the issue of regime change. Although this focus is inevitable, the continuing predominant orientation on democratization has had a negative side-effect; this topic has been analyzed to the point of exhaustion. Experts do not seem to react to current government policy changes, such as attempts to adjust to the increase in energy prices. These developments provide the expert community with the opportunity to react to changes in current strategy. The chance to examine these themes should be explored further, which in turn could open their work up to the wider public and to a variety of other stakeholders, such as the business community.

This growing frustration in the stagnation of ideas is further fostered by the relatively high approval ratings of President Lukashenka. But without a change in focus, the analytical community is in danger of failing into a trap, from which a rejuvenation of thinking, together with a new attitude towards perspective audiences, are the only ways out if improvement under the current conditions is to be achieved.

The analytical community and the media: a long way to go

As with elsewhere, the aim of the mainstream media is to try to attract as many readers as possible. However, narrow themes and an overly-theoretical presentation makes the work difficult for normal readers to follow. Within the current social and economic changes in Belarus, the opportunity arises for independent experts to reach out to the media with relevant analysis and engaging policy recommendations. In essence, the media are unwilling to publish the results and findings of analytical centers, bar an occasional economic report. But exceptions do exist. 'Nasa Niva' was praised for showing interest in the activities of analysts, as were 'Nase Mnenie' and 'New Europe', which are websites that provide room for more intellectual debate. The internet thus remains the field with the most perspective for publishing independent analysis. But even in this, attempts by analysts to present their findings in a more 'reader-friendly' manner are paramount to increase readership.

Financing Issues

Due to continuous state control over the economy and society, the analytical community in Belarus continues to be dependent on foreign donors. Any perspective of gaining financial sources from domestic resources becomes practically impossible. There seems to be an absence of continuity in individual projects supported by foreign partners, with respondents calling for a greater focus on longer-term perspectives. Financial instruments are needed just as much for institutional development, as for actual research projects. The creation of flexible and direct funding mechanisms such as the Belarus Public Policy Fund was however, appreciated by our interviewed experts.

Respondents also pointed out that more foreign aid should be dedicated to supporting a new generation of experts, instead of support for so-called 'favored recipients'. This would provide essential room for long-term development within the sector. International partners have also been criticized for holding an inflexible approach, mostly from the point of view of choosing new themes for research. It was suggested that donors should be more willing to support research by informal structures from civil society which evolve spontaneously (e.g. blog groups or communities of people living in apartment blocks who share a common internet and set of interests). This approach would foster the creation of potential environments for spreading non-conformist opinions and ideas.

Opportunities for Long-Term Development Strategies

The danger of dying a slow death under the constraints of a hostile state apparatus is clear to see. Below, the Pontis Foundation outlines a number of opportunities for defining a more strategic approach within the analytical community.

- q By the creation of platforms and networks, the expert community in Belarus has shown itself to be prepared to adapt its framework to the current repressive conditions. These existing mechanisms of cooperation should therefore be fostered and supported more in the future. They hold the best perspective for the growth of the sector.
- q Greater encouragement and pre-defined funding opportunities for research projects on issues relating to more policy-relevant work should be provided. The narrow focus on democratization does not increase analytical capacity or aid long-term development.
- q Given the changing economic reality in Belarus, low-level communication between independent analysts and business in Belarus could be built on significantly. A focus on sectoral engagement within this sphere has great potential for the development of future partners for the community as a whole.
- q The independent analytical community remains invisible to the wider public. A media strategy should be developed by experts, in order for the community to begin working more closely with the media. The production of more 'consumable' research products, as well as fostering better contacts with journalists would strengthen their position as a central actor within society.
- q Analysts currently do not view the EU as a serious player in Belarus. Although this might change once the European Commission Delegation is opened in Minsk, the EU can go some way in bolstering support through program aid even now. For example, by expanding funding opportunities to non-registered NGOs and networks.
- q Independent analytical structures are in need of a defined strategy for institutional development. Keys to this can be found in focusing on strengthening governance and improving the organizational capacity of the expert community in Belarus.