

Politicisation of civil society in an apolitical society: paternalism, deconsolidation and action strategies of social agents

Since there are many definitions and approaches to civil society, it is important to note that civil society is not just a combination of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but a structure that in democratic societies provides the basis for the interaction of civic and state institutions. Civil society in its interaction with the state has several social functions. Firstly, they allow the solving of private problems and conflicts between social agents without the state's interference, thus lowering the bureaucratic pressure on the country. This principle nowadays is used in business and research in the form of crowdsourcing and citizen science. Secondly, in the framework of cooperation between the state and civil society, two subsystems are able to control each other. The state legal system provides the legislative framework for the coexistence of the state and the society while civil society controls the adherence of the state to democratic principles. Thirdly, civil society has a diagnostic function not only as an instrument of modernisation but as an indicator of the development of the democratic state governed by the rule of law.

The ideal mechanism of interaction between the state and civil society can be described, using Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, as functional interaction of the "system" (sphere of state and economy) and "lifeworld" (sphere of private and social relations).¹ The state, as a conservative structure, reacts to social changes quite slowly. The "lifeworld" is a much more flexible but less structured subsystem. Thus, the relationship between two subsystems, based on communicative action, increases the adaptivity of the state. However, in practice, the interaction between the state and civil society may not have such a functional nature. In the period of establishment of relations, the dominating view could be that the civil sector and the state, instead of engaging in competitive and partnership relations, have to be on different political sides. Sometimes, civil society may

¹ Habermas J. *Moral'noe soznanie i kommunikativnoe deistvie*. // *Moral conscience and communicative action* // SPb.: Nauka, 2000. // Habermas J. *Otnosheniya mezhdu sistemoi i zhiznennym mirom v usloviyakh pozdnego kapitalizma* // *Relations between system and lifeworld in conditions of late capitalism*. // Thesis. 1993. Volume 1. No 2. 1993.

wish to replace the state, especially if by civil society we mean the community of political parties and movements.

There are pre-conditions and opinions demonstrating that the situation described above is present in Belarus. For instance, Ulad Vialichka, the chairman of the international consortium EuroBelarus said, one of the specific features of civil society is its excessive political nature combined with stigmatisation of civil practices by the state.² The politicisation of Belarusian civil society was also mentioned by the sociologist Aliaksei Lastouski.³

We view politicisation not in its aspect of the mass participation of civil society in the political struggle but as a trend to perceive civic activities as political. Since one and the same event can be perceived differently by different social agents, such an approach to analysis will be more heuristic. The current situation should be assessed via the concept of the social frame as a “perspective of perception that creates a formal definition of the situation.”⁴

There have been cases of framing of civic action as political both by representatives of state organs and representatives of civil society. Thus, we have to analyse the spectrum of possible reasons, forms and consequences of framing of the activities of agents of civil society as political by different social agents in current social conditions. By these agents, we mean representatives of state institutions, NGOs, as well as the population, as it is the only potential basis for the formation of civil society.

At the beginning of this analysis, let us review specific political attitudes of Belarusians. Belarusian society is not politicised. Politics does not interest Belarusians much and stays on the periphery of their “lifeworld”. According to IISEPS data for 2013–14, only 5.4% of the adult population takes an active part in political activities.⁵ Interest in politics usually shows in participation in elections, and watching and discussing news with closes friends and relatives.⁶ This demonstrates that the political activity of Belarusians is quite passive and manifests mostly in electoral activities.

The results of the international European Values Survey research (EVS) confirm this trend. In their analysis of data from this research A. Ivaniuta and U. Praudzivets state that interest in politics rises during significant political events, which are usually political

² Which features of civil society are typically Belarusian? – <http://eurobelarus.info/news/society/2012/12/02/priznaki-grazhdanskogo-obschestva.html>.

³ Lastouski A. *Civil society in Belarus: on the way to active democracy* // <http://www.arche.by/by/page/ideas/9701>.

⁴ Goffman I. *Analiz freimov: Esse ob organizatsii povsednevnogo opyta. // Frame analysis: an essay on organisation of everyday experience.* // Moskva: Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2004.

⁵ IISEPS surveys archive. June 2013. // <http://old.iiseps.org/data13-6.html>.

⁶ IISEPS surveys archive. June 2014. // <http://old.iiseps.org/data14-6.html>.

electoral campaigns. Other significant regional and international events can also bring attention to politics.⁷ Among such events nowadays one can name the war in Ukraine.

Alongside the rise of interest of the population in the political process, is the increased activity of civil society actors who work in the same field and encourage actors that had no experience in politics to enter the political field. Political competition intensifies, also due to the attraction of new resources. Examples of such political competition are the Zubr movement created in 2001 and dissolved after the 2006 presidential election or the “Tell the Truth!” campaign organised before the presidential campaign in 2010.

Another specific feature of the political consciousness of the Belarusian society is persistent reproduction of paternalist paradigm that includes: unwillingness to take responsibility for solving social problems on their own; avoiding risks, caused by a lack of willingness of the people to accept the entirety of their subjectiveness; transfer of functions of civic control to the state and, finally, adherence to the narrative that describes society as a patriarchal society chaired by the Father.

According to EVS research, the share of people who positively assess the political system with a “strong leader who does not have to worry about parliament or elections” has almost doubled from 2000 to 2008: from 33.5% to 61.6%.⁸ Quite strikingly, alongside this trend, the share of people with a positive attitude to the democratic political system has grown as well: from 67.3% in 2000 to 73% in 2008.⁹ These two indicators combined give grounds for a statement about the diffusion of paternalist views with the perception of democracy and the infiltration of the “democracy” concept by paternalism.

The September 2013 data of IISEPS, shows the preservation of the paternalist paradigm. The share of those who think that “the state should care about people” was 62.7%, while 10.3% more said that “people should sacrifice something for the state”. 22.7% stated that “people should show initiative and take care of themselves.”¹⁰

The prevalence of political paternalism creates grounds for framing civic activities as political ones. Paternalism creates the illusion of necessity, effectiveness and justifiability of governmental control over all spheres of civic life. In these conditions, representatives of state institutions may perceive various civic activities as political acts. In the cultural field, the catalyser of this process is competition between two national projects: post-Soviet that appeals to the symbols and statehood of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic

⁷ *Tsennostnyi mir sovremennogo cheloveka: Belarus' i ee sosedi v mezhdunarodnykh proektakh po izucheniyu tsennostei. // The world of values of a modern person: Belarus and its neighbours in international projects that study values. // Minsk: BGU, 2013. P. 103.*

⁸ *Tsennostnyi mir sovremennogo cheloveka: Belarus' i ee sosedi v mezhdunarodnykh proektakh po izucheniyu tsennostei. // The world of values of a modern person: Belarus and its neighbours in international projects that study values. // Minsk: BGU, 2013. P. 130.*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ IISEPS surveys archive. September 2013. // <http://old.iiseps.org/data13-9.html>.

(BSSR), and national that is symbolically related to the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR). These projects have a different symbolic basis and cultural codes, and, as a result, different vision of historical narratives and different directions of identity construction. This confrontation of two main national projects manifests in its reduced version in the political field, as well, as a confrontation between “authorities” and “opposition”.

This factor, alongside with the imperative presence of the cultural field in other social fields, influences the genesis of the state's political framing of civic activities. The state defines a desirable spectrum of manifestation of civic activities that are relevant to the cultural code of the dominating national project. Based on this, state institutions are able to frame civic activities as political ones and thus undesirable. That, in turn, causes confrontation in the cultural field.

Paternalism establishes a limited framework for the effective realisation of the concept of civil society. Civil society demands social actors to be active, competent and independent. In the paternalist model, initiative is secondary. The basis for the apologia of paternalism as a governing principle is the perception of the secondary role of subordinates compared to the leader. Activities and initiatives that are not in line with the dominant doctrine are labelled undesirable.

Taking into account the above described scheme of realisation of civic activities in conditions of paternalism, one should admit that these conditions still envisage some spheres for civic activities. The following strategies of involvement into civic interaction with the state can be envisaged:

– *Passive strategy.* The easiest, for realisation strategy does not envisage the involvement of social agents in civic activities. This is the strongest manifestation of the paternalism paradigm.

– *Adaptive strategy.* This strategy is based on participation in activities that do not manifest in the political field or in politically sanctioned activities. Examples of the successful realisation of this strategy, are work of consultative centres or organisations that search for missing persons. According to “Angel” search unit coordinator Yuliya Kouhan, her unit brings added value, not only because it serves as an additional resource in missing persons' cases, but also because it allows to increase the speed of the search at a time, when “the law enforcement agencies cannot act as quickly due to red tape, such as the necessity to receive written permission from their bosses.”¹¹ This means that it is possible to have functional interaction between “system” and “lifeworld” outside of the political field.

– *Confrontational strategy.* This strategy envisages entering the political field and is common to political organisations whose overarching goal is to achieve a certain

¹¹ Coordinator of “Angel” unit: “The main thing in our work is not to waste any time!” // <http://budzma.by/news/yuliya-kowhan-u-nashay-pracy-samaye-halownaye-nye-wpuscic-chas.html>.

recognition in politics. The confrontational strategy can also be adopted by NGOs in cases when their activities are related to politics. The idea of the ineffectiveness of civic activities in current political conditions and urge to change these conditions may also draw organisations into the political field. In this case, civil society actors themselves frame civic activities as political ones.

Politicisation is closely connected to the latter strategy. Therefore, it is important to look at conditions that facilitate a strengthening of the political framing of NGO work.

Firstly, the dependence of NGOs on external, international funding, give grounds for framing civic activities as political ones by the state institutions. Secondly, an important factor are the legal constraints on the activities of civic initiatives. One of the constraints is Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code that introduces criminal responsibility for acting in the name of a non-registered organisation. In this way, the system of state registration of NGOs becomes a filter that allows it to select “desirable” organisations, and pushes “undesirable” ones into the political field.

In these conditions, the trend of two-side political framing of civil activities is strengthening. The side effects of this trend are the emergence of additional contradictions inside the society that disrupt civic consolidation and prevent civil society from developing conflict solution tools. Civil society, which by its definition should be various and diverse, becomes even more de-consolidated in the political field. The example of such a lack of consolidation is the process of selection of a single candidate for the presidential election.

Another example of the deconsolidating role of politicisation, was the scandal related to the Belarusian language courses *Mova ci Kava*. At first, the organiser of the courses, journalist Katsiaryna Kibalchych, made several statements about Belarusian football fans and the war in Ukraine, and in the end, the courses ceased to exist. Those courses, initially planned as ‘apolitical’, demonstrate very well the consequences of a sudden interference of political factors into the cultural field.

On the other hand, politicisation can stimulate the population’s activities; however, this concerns only a narrow group of politically engaged social agents and can bring effect only if political goals of this group envisage the establishment of a system that allows the functioning of civil society.

Thus, politicisation of civic initiatives is not the universal approach to their operations, but one of the options of the manifestation of civic activities that is caused both by external factors and by internal specifics of organisations that choose this path of interaction with the state.

Politicisation of civil society is ambiguous by nature and causes a range of side effects. On the one hand, this process is the result of a low level of effective communication between the state and civil society; on the other, it strengthens this frame. Politicisation

can cause deconsolidation and have a lower effectiveness, narrowing down the wide range of civic activities to political activities.

Political transformation serves as a source of increasing the functionality of interaction. Currently, the government is the only agent that can show initiative in this sphere, and has the most effective tools for that. This transformation, in theory, can manifest itself in the liberalisation of economy or legislation that will make the environment for NGOs more favourable. However, the state is not able to create civil society; moreover, expecting that from the state would reveal paternalistic views.

The most promising perspective is to strengthen civil society at the grass root level via setting up a wide range of smaller initiatives. As we stated above, civil society is not a sum of organisations but rather a principle of self-organisation. The problem of low efficiency in the mechanisms of civil society can be described with the help of the classical concept of “middle class”: a social group of competent professional who are economically independent from the state. Such types of relations forms a basis for taking one’s own responsibility for social dynamics and, as a result, the overcoming of paternalism. Growth of this group can weaken the basis for the framing of the activities of an organisation, as ones of agents of external political influence, with the help of the creation of a local economic platform for socially responsible businesses.

In this way, a solution to this strategic problem lays in the necessity to overcome paternalist social predominance. Inter-influence of social structure and social agents makes the search for effective instruments of stimulation of civic activities relevant. Taking into account the profoundly diverse nature of civil society, social agents can put their mark on lowering the level of interaction with the political field or on different levels of depth of engagement in the political process, but under the condition that their activities will be directed at creation of a basis for the development of civil society.

Significant success of civil society in the near future is unlikely. It is unlikely that the system of effective civic control will be built or that civil society will cause rapid de-bureaucratisation of the state apparatus. Taking into account a certain level of autonomy of social agents that is always in place, but is limited by certain features of a social system, one should underline that every social agent has an opportunity to influence the development of civil society. This is a key issue of social dynamics, since, by choosing goals, tools and spheres of activities, social agents on the one hand contribute to the search for a possible spectrum of tools of development of civil society, and on the other, give an example of democratic relations with the state.