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Social organisations in Belarus: between the state and society

Introduction

Since 2006, the size of the social welfare state in Belarus has been on the decrease under the influence of various factors, the growth of external debt amongst them.[1] The current financial and economic conditions put a question mark on the possibility of continueing the "generous" Soviet-type social policy that was common in the first ten years of Lukashenka's term in the office of president. At the same time, the existing internal situation in the country, characterised in the first place by the increasing share of an aging population, demands some changes, in particular an increase in the number and quality of social services, which the state is no longer able to deliver in the previous volumes.

This factor makes very relevant the inclusion of non-state entities into the sphere of social services and the transfer of a part of social responsibilities. One way to do it, as Belarusian authorities see it, is to bring in private businesses that should take on their shoulders part of the social role. At the level of rhetoric by the head of state (for example, during the State of the Nation address to the people and the National Assembly), one could hear the statements regarding social responsibilities of businesses. The government also took some measures to ensure, through various means, that private companies carry out additional social functions.[2]

Another way is to draw the third sector into the social sphere. In democratic countries, *civil society organisations* (CSOs) are routinely recognised as public policy agents, which perform an important social and humanitarian function. They are believed to accumulate *public concern* over significant social problems, to run debates and to define political rhetoric. They also identify *who* will (the choice of agents) and *how to* (the selection of

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[1] According to the estimates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), two financial crises (2008–2009 and 2011) led to a twofold growth of external debt up to 61.1% percent of GDP and an even greater financial dependence from Russia.

[2] For example, the president's edict No 40 dated 16.01.2009 obliging self-employed entrepreneurs to make payments to the Social Security Fund came into force on 1.01.2014.

tools) implement a chosen policy. (Bryce H.J. *Players in the Public Policy Process*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. 1)

As of writing, CSOs in Belarus are yet to become fully-fledged actors in public policy. Nevertheless, some changes in the field of social policy are taking place. Under the state's social contracting mechanism, effective from 2014, non-governmental organisations can compete for public budget money and win projects to render social services. Besides, in some cases, state institutions – particularly at local level – cooperate with the CSOs, which work with various categories of the socially vulnerable population. However, the latter type of interaction is rather sporadic; it definitely cannot be described as a steady trend. Despite the availability of a developed system of social services, the question of interaction by its main actor – the state – with other entities remains open.

The Belarusian state is simultaneously the decision-making entity in the social sphere and the main implementer. The state (represented by various agencies and institutions) remains the main subject of social services. At the same time, although both theoretical and practical studies have recognised an enormous potential possessed by non-governmental organisations, CSOs rarely become a partner in social policy in practice.

Hypothesis, goal and methodology

This article focuses on the problem of interaction between social CSOs and the state. It also includes a comprehensive and chronological presentation of this type of organisation. The hypothesis is based on the following assumption: Belarusian social CSOs have a real potential both in terms of providing social services and participating in social policy. However, due to numerous formal obstacles (common also for other types of CSOs), their internal problems and special relationship with the state, this potential is not fully realised. Their involvement is limited mainly to the phase of implementation and policy monitoring as well as actual work with their target groups.

Social CSOs have very limited possibilities for the promotion of their initiatives and the interests of the groups they provide their services to. Meanwhile, just like in the Soviet times, the *state* and *state institutions*[3] play the leading role in rendering social services.

Therefore, the *goal* of this article is to analyse the situation, in which social CSOs used to operate and are currently working, as well as some structural and functional characteristics of their existence. For that purpose, the article is divided into several parts. The *first* part deals with the problems of defining the notion of "social organisation" and

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[3] Based on the previously conducted research, it can be argued that Territorial Social Service Centres (TSSC) are currently the primary and dominant type of entities, which provide social services to the population. The territorial centres are the largest type of social service organisations in terms of quantity (148 TSSCs with various structural units). They are funded from the state budget. At the same time, the volume of their services and the number of target groups they can serve are quite limited.

offers several justifications for the classification of social CSOs and identification of their quantity. The *second* part offers a brief overview of the timeline – how these organisations emerged and developed beginning from 1991. The *third* part looks into the contemporary condition and structural and functional features of social CSOs. The *fourth* part analyses their interaction with the state and participation in public policy.

The main *methods,* utilised to collect and analyse the data used in this article, include: descriptive analysis, secondary data analysis, semi-structured interviews, and the questionnaire survey data gathered during the SYMPA/BIPART research project titled "Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus"[4] from May until July 2014.

The problem of defining the term "social organisation", classification and quantity in Belarus

The term "social CSO" is hard to define. If based on the formal approach, this definition can apply to all organisations, which work to assist socially vulnerable groups, or the organisations which work in the social service sphere. However, the use of the second criteria seems to be rather problematic because the term *"social services"* in Belarus has a broad interpretation and is defined as "activities with the purpose of organising and rendering social services, helping people activate their own efforts to prevent or overcome a difficult life experience and/or adapt to it (Article 1 of the Law on Social Services)."

Also another problematic and too broadly used term, used as a criterion to include a person into the sphere covered by social services – is *"a difficult life situation."* It is defined as "circumstances (or a set of circumstances), which objectively disrupt the normal life of a citizen, the consequences of which he or she is unable to overcome with his/her own means and available possibilities (Article 1 of the Law on Social Services)."

As one can see from the definitions, when interpreted literally, both the first and second terms allow virtually any citizen of Belarus to qualify as a beneficiary of social services.

However, this literal interpretation of the Belarusian law pushes some social groups outside of the social service sphere. For example, Article 28 of the Law on Social Services sets out a limited list of target groups.[5] In particular, it excludes people with addiction,

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[4] *Analysis of the social service sector in the Republic of Belarus* (Kavalkin and others) is available at http://oeec.by/story/analiz-sektora-socialnogo-obsluzhivaniia-naseleniia-respubliki-belarus (checked on 27.03.2015).

[5] Under the law, a difficult life situation can be proved by the following features: low income; orphanhood; the lack of a place of residence; unemployment; disability; inability of a person to take care of her/himself and the loss of motor activity; poor family situation; conflicts; domestic violence; the lack of employable relatives who are legally obliged to support such a person; the loss of social ties during imprisonment in the correctional facilities of the Interior Ministry; simultaneous birth

psychiatric disorders, and those who suffer from socially conditioned diseases (alcoholism, drug addiction, etc.) or those who potentially get into the risk groups (e.g. homosexual men, etc.). Rights defenders describe it as a restriction of human rights. They note that the law restricts access to social assistance and education by people whose disability was the result of illegal actions, alcoholic and narcotic intoxication or self-harm. (Equal Rights Trust in partnership with the Belarusian Helsinki Committee). Half an Hour to Spring: Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Belarus // ERT Country Report Series: 3. London, November 2013. P. 150.

Therefore, when defining the so-called "social organisations" it makes sense to apply not the formal but the *functional approach*. The latter embraces all organisations with the aim of rendering social services to various social groups as well as people who, on their own and without additional assistance, are unable to secure the decent livelihood and the function in society they deserve.

At the same time, such a broad interpretation creates additional problems for defining the specific cohort of social CSOs in Belarus. Firstly, as of today, there is no list of the registered organisations of this kind available on the website of the Ministry of Justice or any other information platforms of the institutions responsible for registration. The existing, general list of public associations at the Ministry of Justice is, in the view of experts, incomplete and outdated. (Kavalkin and others, Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus // OEEC, SYMPA/BIPART, 2014. P. 35 http://oeec.by/story/analiz-sektora-socialnogo-obsluzhivaniia-naseleniia-respubliki-belarus).

The Social Belarus database[6], created by the Social Information Bureau at the Belarusian Association of Social Workers (BASW) can be used as an alternative to the analysis of social CSOs. Although not without defects[7], it is quite sufficient for the classification of social organisations by target group (see Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of social CSOs according to the Social Belarus database

No	Target group	Organisation (examples)	Remarks
	Refugees and migrants	Afghan Community, International Charitable Non-Governmental Organisation for Afghan Refugees	

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of three or more people; presence in the family of a child with special physical and mental needs, including a child with disability; death of a close relative or a family member; damage caused by fire or other natural disasters, the affects of which a person is unable to overcome autonomously.

[6] Social Belarus database (in Russian) http://ru.belbsi.by/rights/social_belarus/organizations/.

[7] See "Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus for more details about the problems of classification and identification of social CSOs and the Social Belarus database (pp. 35–36).

No	Target group	Organisation (examples)	Remarks
	Homeless	Christian Mission Serving Prisoners "Sophia"	One of the least represented categories in the social services sector. A possible explanation for this situation can be that the state treats the homeless as potential criminals who are subject to the Interior Ministry's area of responsibility.
	Jobless	League of Youth's Voluntary Labour, Belarusian Youth Association "New Faces"	In the light of the particular situation with the registration of unemployed people in the official statistics in Belarus, organisations in this group mainly focus on young people (helping get a job without prior work experience)
	Former concentration camp prisoners and repressed	Belarusian Public Association of Veterans	National-level and regional-level organisations, some of them connected with the Belarusian Public Association of Veterans. The number of organisations in this category is quite big. It is most likely because the practice and the focus on assisting WWII participants has remained since the Soviet times.
	HIV-positive	Belarusian Public Association "Positive Movement", National Youth Public Association "Sustrecha" (Rendez-Vous)	
	Former military personnel	Afghan War Veterans Association, Belarusian Public Association of Soldiers' Mothers	This group follows the Soviet tradition to preserve numerous organisations, which unite veterans of various wars, army branches as well as the soldiers' mothers.
	Children under difficult circumstances/ children-at-risk	SOS - Children's Village Belarusian Fund, Belarusian Children Fund, Future for Children – Belarusian Charitable Association, International NGO "Ponimanie" (Understanding), "We are for Children" Belarusian Foundation for Supporting Children and Teenagers, Mothers against Drugs	One of the most numerous of categories
	Children with disabilities	Belarusian Association of Assistance to Children and Young People with Disabilities, Belarusian Children's Hospice, "Children of Chernobyl" Belarusian Committee	

No	Target group	Organisation (examples)	Remarks
	People with various diseases	Belarusian Association of Haemophilia Patients, Multiple Sclerosis Patients Association of the Belarusian Society of Disabled People	Sports organisations for people with disabilities belong to this category, too: Belarusian Physical Training and Sports Federation for Disabled People and Belarusian Movement of Medical Personnel (uniting those who work in state-run healthcare institutions)
	Rape victims	Gender Perspectives International Public Association	Various organisations, including those supported by the state and enjoying the preferences of the regime (Belarusian Women's Union)
	Convicted and released prisoners	Mercy – Non-Governmental Charitable Organisation, Christian Service to Moral Revival of Convicts	It unites the organisations, which are the primary part of the database compiled by the Centre for Social Rehabilitation of Former Convicts
	People with addictions	Belarusian Psychiatric Association of Registered Nurses, Belarusian Youth Social Association "Different-Equal", Belarusian Public Association "Positive Movement", Charitable religious mission "Return" (Anonymous Alcoholics)	This group also includes professional, youth, charitable and religious associations.
	People with disabilities	Belarusian Society of Disabled People, Belarusian Society of People with Impaired Vision, Belarusian Deaf Peoples' Society, Belarusian Association of Disabled People in Wheelchairs, Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities	This category aggregates about 100 actors, including the organisations which have remained since the Soviet times.
	People with psychiatric disabilities	Belarusian Association of Psychotherapists, Belarusian Psychiatric Association	It is one of the least represented categories.
	People with low income	"Mercy" Kobryn Town Charitable Society, "Byarestse" Charitable Society, Mogilev City Society of Social Support and Universal Dialogue	These organisations are mainly regional, including various religious organisations.
	Victims of the Chernobyl disaster and catastrophe victims	Disabled of Chernobyl, "EcoHome" Non-Governmental Organisation	This category also includes organisations with a low public profile. For example, the Belarusian Committee of High-Risk Detachment Veterans, the Belarusian branch of International Public Foundation for Liquidation of the Consequences of Accidents and Emergencies.

No	Target group	Organisation (examples)	Remarks
	Families with many children	Belarusian Large Family Parents Association	This association has many regional units. This category also includes various regional and local-level organisations of large families.
	Single-parent families, single parents	Yes to Life - International Charitable Non-Governmental Organisation, Inter-confessional Mission "Social Christian Service"	There are few organisations in this category, which partially overlaps the Families with Many Children group as well as with several international charitable organisations

Source: Kavalkin and others. *Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus*, pp. 36–43.

Disaggregation of third-sector organisations by the *type of activity* (e.g. sports, youth, ecological, charitable organisations, etc.) is yet another classification used by the Justice Ministry officials. However, this approach also appears to be problematic when defining social CSOs, because in this case the organisations, which deal with social problems or render social services, are disaggregated by different categories (charitable, women's youth, religious organisations, etc). In this way, this approach does not allow defining them within one group.

It is interesting how members of *social organisations* define themselves when they use the term 'social organisation' to describe their activities. According to one of the existing classifications of the third sector, such types of organisation, creates an alternative to the state-run social services, accumulating and redistributing resources for the implementation of socially significant projects. (Kuzmiankova T. *Third sector in Belarus: Problems of Formation and Development*. Mozyr: Bely Vieter Publishing House, 2004. p. 27).

It is hard to say without additional analysis why this particular category gained popularity with CSO members. One can admit that it is related to the separation of those who deal with social problems of certain target groups from those groups (for example, separation of members of the organisations, which work against AIDS, from those who suffer from HIV/AIDS). It means that members of an organisation position themselves as those who provide services to socially vulnerable groups and people.

As may be seen, there are certain problems with defining the notion of a social/socially-oriented CSO without using such a formal criterion. At the same time, it is obvious that defining these organisations by target groups only, has flaws. Therefore, using the functional approach, or defining organisations by goals and practical work, seems to be the most reasonable option.

A brief review of the formation of social organisations after gaining independence

During the first years of Belarus' independence, when the former system of social benefits distribution was breaking up, along with the economic crisis, "restoring social justice became one of the most popular ideas in the mass post-Soviet consciousness." (*Belarus. Reform Scenarios*. Warsaw: Stefan Batory Foundation, 2004. P. 205).

This motive was present in the rhetoric of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who – apart from the fight against corruption – exploited, for political purposes, the economically-rooted population's nostalgia about 'stability'. The latter was linked with the restoration of the Soviet (or similar to the Soviet) model of the state-controlled distribution of resources. At the same time, "transition from the idea of social justice to the concept of social solidarity" was never realised in the country. (*Belarus. Reform Scenarios*. Warsaw: Stefan Batory Foundation, 2004. P. 205).

Beginnig in the mid-1990s, this idea was promoted by some independent experts as an alternative to the neo-Soviet social policy model.

Nevertheless, political, economic and social changes in the country required an additional effort to deal with the problems arising. It was obvious that in the 1990s and 2000s the Belarusian state was incapable of resolving both the existing social issues (e.g. assisting disabled persons or families with many children) and new problems (poverty, new vulnerable groups) autonomously or with the help from the Soviet-type pseudo-social organisations (trade unions, various associations of disabled persons, veterans' organisations etc). Apart from the social pains and hardships of the transitional period common for all post-Soviet states (decline in living standards, growth in inequality, unemployment, etc.), Belarus was facing the challenge of tackling the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster.

In conditions of political changes and economic difficulties in the 1990s–2000s, new players began to emerge alongside the governmental and traditional Soviet-time entities in the social services sphere – international organisations (United National Development Programme, in the first place) and national socially-oriented CSOs. The former's area of work primarily included the fight against poverty, prevention of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, promotion of gender equality, and environmental issues. National socially-oriented CSOs focused on charitable work and the provision of social services to various social groups.

To analyse the chronology of the development and formation of Belarusian NGOs, one can refer to the periodization used by some Belarusian researchers (Chavusau, Rouda[8]) and follow them in talking about the following periods:

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[8] Uladzimir Rouda singles out two more periods of NGOs in Belarus: 1960s–1980s – creation of preconditions for the development of organisations, the emergence of informal youth movements; and 1985–1991 – the emergence of informal organisations that promoted culture.

Late 1980s – mid-1990s. Legalisation of informal movements, the emergence of various new NGOs, the beginning of their *de-politicisation* and *specialisation* by different types of activities (including the social work done by, for example, the Children of Chernobyl Foundation)

Middle-late 1990s. A further *quantitative growth* of organisations (from 24 registered in 1990s up to 2191 in 1998).[9] (Chavusau Yu. *Civil society: long-standing traditions, lack of strategy* // Henrich Boll Stiftung, Warsaw, 2009. http://pl.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/hramadz_supolnasc_by.pdf.)

In parallel, a new wave of *politicisation* was taking place, i.e. the emergence of organisations, which focused their work on the achievement of political goals, such as democratisation (for example, the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres). The same period also saw a spike in the activities of *unregistered associations.*

In the same period there occurred a further *specialisation* of organisations, which dissociated themselves from political agendas and prioritised the defence of the interests of their target groups.

The period from the late 1990s to 2003 saw the increased *suppression* of NGOs by the state. The number of NGOs dropped due to the loss of legal status (down to 1537 organisations after re-registration in 1999) (Chernov V. *Third sector in Belarus: evolution, current status and development prospects.* Wider Europe Review. Volume 4. No 4 (14). Autumn 2007. http://review.w-europe.org/14/2.html).

2003–2009: *increasing pressure* on NGOs by the state: the reduction of possibilities for foreign and internal funding, criminal responsibility for acting on behalf of unregistered organisations, difficulties with registration, etc. In parallel, the state created conducive conditions for the formation of the so-called government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs),[10] which aimed to substitute for the civil society organisations that had emerged outside of the state's controls.

The *current period* can be characterised by the following features: continued pressure on NGOs via legal mechanisms, a small number of new organisations,[11] a further division of the third sector between "politicised" and "de-politicised" organisations, continued operation of pseudo non-governmental organisations like the Belarusian Republic

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[9] Despite the re-registration in 1995.

[10] The so-called GONGOs appeared in Belarus in 2003. Their work is regulated by a separate piece of legislation.

[11] According to the data of the Assembly of NGOs, 70 new organisations were registered in 2013, 111 in 2012, 118 in 2011, 134 in 2010, and 94 in 2009. See: *Belarus Civil Society Organizations in Cross-Sectoral Dialogue. Summary of Legal Environment Research and Expert Survey.* Minsk: The Assembly of pro-democratic non-governmental organizations of Belarus (Assembly of NGOs), International educational non-governmental organization ACT (ACT), Belarusian Analytical Workroom (BAW). 2014. P. 25.

Youth Union, the Belarusian Union of Women, etc. The question of periodization and consideration of the current conditions of the third sector in Belarus requires a deeper analysis than this article, which presents only general tendencies.

Concerning the processes of creation and evolution of Belarusian socially-oriented organisations, they are related to general periodization common for the whole third sector. It is also necessary to note that these organisations face the same totality of structural limitations in their work, just like the organisations of other types of activity.

At the same time, the number of social organisations, as a percentage of the total quantity of all organisations, was increasing, in fact. Beginning from late 2000s, "social services" were defined as the second most popular area of operation for NGOs. In 2011, out of 2325 organisations registered in Belarus over 600 focused on social protection and rehabilitation (nearly 200 organisations for disabled persons and over 400 charitable organisations can be added to them).[12] In other words, organisations, which dealt with the problems of socially vulnerable groups, accounted for almost half of the total number of registered organisations. Only one group of social CSOs, linked to Chernobyl accident-related issues, was significantly reduced during re-registration. (Kuzmiankova T. *Third sector in Belarus: Problems of Formation and Development.* Mozyr: Bely Vieter Publishing House, 2004. P. 14).

Just like in other spheres of social activity, many of the socially-oriented organisations, which are well known today, were created during the *first years of independence* (early – mid-1990s), including:

- Those *aimed at working with children in difficult social or life situations:* Belarusian Children's Fund (1988), Belarus – SOS Children's Villages (1991), Belarusian Children's Hospice (1994), Children in Need (1990);
- Various *religious and minorities organisations*, which assumed social obligations. For example, Caritas Belarus – religious mission and charitable Catholic society (1990), Jewish Charitable Fund "Hesed-Rahamim" (began operation in 1989, registered in 1994);
- *specialised professional organisations* – Belarusian Association of Social Workers[13] (1996).

Also in this period of time, numerous organisations were registered and became very active.

Many of them were founded with the objective of providing assistance to *victims of Chernobyl* (for example, Disabled People of Chernobyl – 1991), *charitable* (Hope-Express – 1993, Tree of Life – 1998), *people with disability* (Republic Association of Disabled People

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[12] For more details, see article *What do Belarusian public associations do?* // Yekaterina Siniuk, 28.10.2011 http://news.tut.by/society/256321.html.

[13] Prior to re-registration in 1999 – Belarusian Union of Social Pedagogs and Social Workers.

in Wheelchairs – 1997, Belarusian Association of Assistance to Children and Young People with Disabilities – 1994). Besides this, organisations were created in order to adapt those who lost their social positions after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in particular, former servicemen (Belarusian Foundation for Social Support of Ex-Servicemen – 1991).

A certain number of socially-oriented organisations failed to undergo re-registration in 1991. However, given the share of this kind of organisations in the future as well as because of the state's need for supplementary entities to work with socially vulnerable groups, one can admit that they did not suffer significant losses in comparison with others (youth, educational, human rights organisations, etc.). After 1999, more organisations important for the social sphere, were registered. They worked with various groups and covered a range of areas: *work with children who suffered violence* (International NGO "Ponimanie" (Understanding) 2000); *charities* (NGO World without Frontiers 2000); fight against violence (Charitable Organisation "Radzislava" 2002); *assistance to children and people with disabilities* (Republican Association of Parents of Children with Impaired Vision – 2002[14]); *work with elderly people* (International NGO "Mutual Understanding" – 2007).

The registration of the *Association "Belarusian AIDS Network"*, uniting 17 prominent NGOs working in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, in 2007 stands out as a "special event". It was an unusual case for the Belarusian third sector, where the majority of organisations dealing with similar issues can interact with each other but, as a rule, prefer not to enter into associations.

Although several more new socially-oriented SCOs were registered after 2008, most of the established and well-known organisations had emerged before that.

Summing up, one can say that social organisations passed through the same stages in their development as other third-sector entities. These include the heydays of the early 1990s and their transformation into what they appear to be now, towards the end of 2000s. Probably, they felt less pressure from the state – yet, one cannot say they were under no pressure at all.

Current status and structural and functional characteristics of socially-oriented organisations

To analyse the current state of Belarusian socially-oriented organisations, it is important to refer to the point about *de-politicisation* of their activities, which, according to the periodization above, began as early as in mid-1990s. In fact, those organisations work primarily with their target groups without taking part in political initiatives. One

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[14] According to some sources, the Republican Association of Parents of Children with Impaired Vision was founded in 1995.

can assume that this position can be explained, in the first place, by the fact that the "Big State" maintains its status as the primary provider of social services with corresponding practices of management and interaction with other entities, which are regarded not as partners but as the entities that must obey state-run social institutions.

The assumption about *deliberate de-politicisation,* is indirectly backed up by the results of the Research into the Belarusian Organised Civil Society's Solidarity Potential. The research report underlines that "more than a third of organised civil society representatives" are similar in their orientation to *de-politicisation*, and in their acceptance of the existing circumstances of the Belarusian situation... This group may be able to manifest solidarity, but not "protest solidarity; it is ready to display solidarity 'yes'. Its sphere is primarily social services and assistance." (Centre for European Transformation (CET), Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS): Research into organised civil society's solidarity potential // http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014_Solidarity_NGOs_ Belarus-EN.pdf, 2014. P. 73).

Social services have become some kind of *compromise zone*, where Belarusian CSOs organisations can operate. This type of activity is recognised as a legitimate (yet a non-partnership) area of work not only for the state but also for other entities. According to research carried out by the Assembly of NGOs in 2014, social services were one of the key activities of Belarusian CSOs. Social services were mentioned by 36.7% of respondents representing both registered and unregistered organisations during a survey in the frame of that research. (Belarus Civil Society Organizations In Cross-Sectoral Dialogue..., p. 38).

One can admit that the number of those organisations could be higher, if we add here philanthropy and charitable organisations (7.3%) (Belarus Civil Society Organizations In Cross-Sectoral Dialogue..., p. 39).

One of the results of this de-politicised, relatively loyal and non-autonomous stance with regard to the existing power in the country, has been an increase in the number of social organisations in the period when other NGOs, not loyal to the state, faced significant difficulties in their operation. According to United Way's data, in the period from 1998 to 2004, the number of organisations primarily dealing with "social protection and rehabilitation" increased from 5.8 up to 22.9% (Kuzmiankova 2004).

Furthermore, social organisations have recently been recognised as the most successful in terms of securing funding locally – something that is totally impossible for other CSO activities in fields such as advocacy or human rights. According to the 2013 CSO Sustainability Index,

Faith-based and social CSOs such as Chance International Children's Charity Foundation, UniHelp International Charity Public Association, and the Belarusian Children's Hospice NGO are the most successful local fundraisers (2013 CSO Sustainability Index – Belarus, USAID. P. 36) http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/ E&E%202013%20CSOSI%20Final%2010-29-14.pdf.

When looking at the structure of the social CSO field, it is necessary to note that the organisations, which existed during the Soviet times and performed social redistribution functions, have maintained strong positions. Here we are talking about trade unions, in the first place. According to IISEPS data, among all types of public associations Belarusians mostly trust official trade unions (44.3% in 2014; 37.1% in 2013 and 38.1% in 2012) and disability-oriented organisations (41.3% in 2014; 32.1% in 2013 and 33.9% in 2012).

However, this article does not focus on trade unions. They stand rather as a corporate pro-government structure, which, on one hand, re-distributes certain social benefits, and, on the other hand, are designed to absorb protest sentiments among workers. Furthermore, trade unions do not set the objective of directly assisting socially vulnerable groups.

In the context of analysing the social services field, associations of disabled people, youth, women's, veterans and WWII prisoners' organisations that have remained since the Soviet times, appear to be a more interesting object under study. By and large, they can be characterised as "former Soviet corporate structures, the majority of which directly or indirectly are subordinate to the state."[15]

Apart from symbolic positions, the organisations above kept some material resources and assets after the breakup of the USSR: enterprises, cultural institutions, and discount rental rates. On a political level, their representatives are invited to make public manifestations of their loyalty to the authorities (e.g., ahead of presidential elections during All-Belarusian People's Congress meetings, where their representatives take part in making speeches[16]. At the same time, such a public position did not prevent the respondents representing disability-oriented organisations from making relevantly critical assessment of the state policy in this field during an interview carried out in the framework of the research titled "Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus." Their criticism was primarily related to the cuts in funding from the state and insufficient attention by the authorities to the problems of their target groups.

The Belarusian Red Cross Society (Red Cross) can be singled out as a separate entity in the field of socially oriented CSOs. This organisation is often described as the most well-known – recognition that is even formally embedded in legislation. The Red Cross's work is regulated by a separate law[17]. Additional financial benefits simply underline the

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[15] At the same time, it is worth noting that in conditions of a changed political environment, these organisations may qualify for another category, which Kazanecki characterises as "post-Soviet public associations, which are gradually transformed into autonomous associations and strive to represent their interests independently." (Kuzmiankova T. *Third sector in Belarus: Problems of Formation and Development.* Mozyr: Bely Vieter Publishing House, 2004. P. 27). Some similar organisations in Lithuania and Poland went through such a transition.

[16] For example, speech by the chair of Belarusian Society of People with Impaired Vision during the IV All-Belarusian People's Congress in 2010 http://ont.by/news/our_news/0063097?page=6432.

[17] Law on Belarusia Red Cross Society dated 24 October 2000 (revised).

special nature of relations between this organisation and the state. For example, the state pays, out of the national budget, membership fees to the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (Article 13 of the law). Moreover, the Law (Chapter 4) has a separate provision that deals with the issues of interaction with the state, including the possibility of receiving a social contract. These and other circumstances give grounds to the conclusion that the Red Cross holds an *exclusive* and, to some degree, *dominant* position in the social services field. Special status in this sector is also attributed to the so-called *exclusive social CSOs*, which work with a very specific target group and have no competitors – like, for example, the *Belarusian Children's Hospice*.

Moreover, *faith-based, gender and specialised CSOs* can also be defined as a separate category of organisations, which also provide specific social services. The former are recognised as legitimate entities for cooperation by state agencies, for example: Christian Social Service, Caritas Belarus – religious mission and the charitable Catholic Society, Union of Charity Sisterhoods of Belarusian Orthodox Church, a parish of The Minsk Icon of the Mother of God Church "Joy for All Sad People." Gender organisations, as a rule, also render some specific social services to various target groups. In particular, they provide psychological or other assistance to single parents in situations of domestic violence or helping to resolve other family problems. Among them are such organisations as Gender Perspectives, Mogilev's Women's Centre for Support and Self-education (Mogilev). Concerning professional organisations in the social services field, one can single out the Belarusian Association of Social Workers (BASW), which unites members by profession as well as other people who are involved in providing social services. This organisation is also noteworthy for its informational activities (compilation of databases, a specialised library of social work, etc).

Concerning the composition of *target groups* of socially oriented organisations, they currently work with a wide circle of socially vulnerable population categories. A certain evolution can be noticed compared to the period of the early and mid-1990s, when CSOs began to work with the categories of people, already covered by the organisations that had existed since the Soviet times (for example, people with disabilities, veterans). Moreover, some of the new organisations with the objective of working with these traditional target groups, were founded with the participation of the organisations that existed during the Soviet times. For example, the *Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* was established in 2011 with the involvement of one of the oldest organisations in this field – *Belarusian Society of Disabled People*. At the same time, new organisations emerged and began to work with a variety of target groups.

A 2014 survey revealed the following most popular *types of activity* among social CSOs (Kovalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Services Sector in the Republic of Belarus //* p. 46):

– Social and household services (69.8%);

– Humanitarian assistance (61.1%);

– Informational support (60.3%);

– Socialisation of socially vulnerable groups (60.3%).

If we compare the work of socially oriented CSOs with the activities of state institutions in the social services field, it appears that both provide approximately similar services. At the same time, *advocacy* can be singled out as a particular type of activity for CSOs (29.7%) (Kovalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Services Sector in the Republic of Belarus* // p. 52).

Thus, deliberate *de-politicisation* and positioning outside of the political agenda is one of the key characteristics of social CSOs. In terms of existing entities in this field, one should note the *preservation of pro-corporatist organisations*, which have been there since the Soviet times, and the entity that enjoys special treatment, namely the Red Cross. Special mention can be also made for CSOs, which provide exclusive services, as well as for the organisations, which focus on activities in other fields (gender, religion) but which are also involved in working with socially vulnerable groups.

Interaction between social CSOs and the state

Interaction with the state is the key issue for social organisations. It can be argued that this is the determining factor for their operation and work with target groups. Although it is true for all types of Belarusian CSOs that the effectiveness of their work heavily depends on interaction with or at least no interference from the state, this relationship is crucial for socially oriented organisations.

Numerous organisations demonstrate their cooperation with the state even at the level of their rhetoric. For example, one of the biggest and most outstanding CSOs in the field, Belarusian Children's Hospice, points to cooperation with the Ministry of Healthcare of Belarus when describing its activity (from 2014 Social Forum presentations).

In return, Belarusian authorities *symbolically recognise* the work of (at least some) social organisations as socially important. For example, the website of the Ministry of Justice posted positive descriptions of activities carried out by several social CSOs (*Belarusian Association of Assistance to Children and Young People with Disabilities*, *Belarusian Charitable Association "Hope for the Future"* and others).[18] Similar positive positioning and recognition can be observed at the level of the Humanitarian Activities Department of the Presidential Administration, which published information about the

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[18] Section "Work of Publis Association on Ministry of Justice's website" (2013) http://www.minjust.by/ru/site_menu/activities_of_public_associati/deyatel.

awards for some charitable and social organisations.[19] In terms of material benefits, this recognition is manifested through *easing* by the state when it comes to, for example, discount rental rates. The list of organisations entitled to office rental benefits contains many social organisations, including: *Belarusian Children's Hospice, Disabled People of Chernobyl, Children in Need, Belarusian Large Family Parents Association, Association of Disabled People in Wheelchairs*, etc.[20] However, this easing is quite unpredictable. Social organisations can be included or excluded from this list without any explanation whatsoever.

Playing on the field where state is the primary actor,[21] social organisations try to find various forms, models and ways of such interaction with the authorities, even when the latter do not make any specific steps forward. At the same time, international experts regard social CSOs as organisations that have the best chances for cooperation with the government. The USAID report underlines that "CSOs generally have to take the initiative in approaching authorities to establish cooperation. Authorities prefer to cooperate only with trusted partners on non-controversial social issues." (2013 CSO Sustainability Index – Belarus, p. 37).

However, CSO representatives assess the opportunities for their participation in the social services sector as *unequal (with the state)* but tend to characterise this inequality as *"natural"*, because CSOs, by their status, do not qualify for the same position. (Kavalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus...*, p. 81).

Nevertheless, both the authorities and social organisations describe the latter from time to time as *mediators between the state and society*, or as the entities, which can supplement the state in the social sphere when state institutions are too slow or, due to existing limitations, are unable to provide social services to the population. (Kavalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus...*, p. 83).

Requirement by *international donors and programmes* to cooperate with the CSOs is the key external factor that occasionally ensures the presence of CSO in various social (and other) programmes run by the state. At the same time, "the government... continues

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[19] Information about the meeting at the Office of the President, where an award ceremony for social and charitable organisations took place, on the official website http://www.pmrb.gov.by/?id=36&news_org_id=90&news_id=928&page=1.

[20] Resolution No 327 of the Council of Minister of the Republic of Belarus dated 30.04.2013 "On approving the list of public organisations (associations) and their organisational structures, foundations, unions of legal persons and/or self-employed entrepreneurs, which are entitled to the decreasing coefficient 0.1 to be applied to the baserates of real estate rentals."

[21] According to the survey results, 70.6% of respondents mentioned the state as the primary provider of social services. At the same time, less than 1.0% of respondents recognised the leading role of CSOs. 25.4% acknowledged that the state and CSOs provided services on a parity basis. (Kavalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus...*, p. 61).

to be highly suspicious and mistrustful towards CSOs." (USAID's 2013 CSO Sustainability Index – *Belarus report*, p. 40).

Concerning the intensity of cooperation between CSOs and state institutions, it is probably higher at the *local* than at the national level. This tendency is common for all Belarusian organisations. CSO representatives note that only some organisations may have an influence on the decision-making of the authorities. At the local level, 46.0% of organisations have "at least some influence". At the level of national executive bodies, this figure is 31.3% and 13.3% at the level of the Parliament and Presidential Administration (*Belarus Civil Society Organizations in Cross-Sectoral Dialogue...*, p. 5–6).

Some representatives of social organisations said they have possibilities for lobbying for changes in legislation at the national level. However, this may be a one-off development rather than a positive trend. (Kavalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus...*, p. 84).

Experts assess cooperation between CSOs and the authorities in the social sphere at the local level (also the development of local communities) quite positively. (2013 CSO Sustainability Index – *Belarus*, p. 37).

At the same time, CSO representatives noted a certain degree of distrust but also some understanding of the importance of the civil society sector by the local authorities. (Kavalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus...*, p. 84).

Concerning the quality and forms of social CSO's presence in the public policy of Belarus and given the specifics of the political cycle and the dominant role of the "Grand State", participation of CSOs is most likely at the stage of *monitoring the social policy or implementation* of various social projects or programs (especially when required by international donors). For example, CSO representatives were invited to take part in monitoring and evaluation of projects in the field of HIV/AIDS. (2013 CSO Sustainability Index – *Belarus*, p. 37).

It is noteworthy that even such a limited participation in the public policy is often assessed by CSO representatives quite positively. For instance, when describing inequality and the policy of Belarusian authorities towards people with disability, human rights defenders note "an important and constructive role of civil society, which performs monitoring and gives recommendations to the authorities about solutions for accessibility problems." (*Half an Hour to Spring: Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Belarus...*, pp. 163–164).

However, at a practical level, the organisations' "monitoring data" often remains simply a piece of information, which gets to an officials' desk but has no further dissemination or influence on policy implementation.

State social contract mechanism (SSC) is a separate topic, which requires a deeper and thorough analysis. According to the research results, although the majority of organisations,

in general, assessed it in a positive way, many of them voiced numerous doubts over the mechanisms and practices of its implementation, in particular, (problematic bidding process, requirement to possess 50.0% of own means for the implementation of a state social contract, insufficient awareness of the procedures and many others). The majority of respondents (60.3%) agreed with the statement that SSC is "a good idea but it remains unclear how it will work in practice." (Kavalkin and others: *Analysis of the Social Service Sector in the Republic of Belarus...*, pp. 67, 85–86).

Thus, the relationships between Belarusian social/socially-oriented CSOs and the state can be described as twofold. On one hand, they seek to interact with the state and its institutions because their area of activity remains vertically subordinate to the state. The state maintains its status as the primary provider of social benefits. The state also seems to recognise CSOs as entities, which provide some social services. This recognition occurs both at the symbolic and material levels. On the other hand, social organisations face a number of problems, which are common to other types of CSOs, and have limited opportunities in the advocacy field, taking part in the public policy, rather at the level of implementation and monitoring. These organisations find themselves outside of the political agenda due to their own strategy of escapism and the state's perception of them as loyal implementers of certain social responsibilities.

Conclusions

The situation in the field of social CSOs can be described as both typical and atypical for the third sector in Belarus. The state needs these organisations in situations when, due to some circumstances, it is no longer able to deliver on its expanded social obligations. At the same time, given the specifics of the political regime, the state cannot afford to let the social sphere go out of its vertical control. In return, socially oriented organisations deliberately take a de-politicised stance, which allows them to be present in the field of public and social policy; their role, however, remains largely limited (although these organisations could bring in some positive innovations into legislation). At the same time, as a reward from the state for this position, it is the possibility for CSOs to work with their target groups; it also goes along with some material support and reduced risk levels. In other words, this exchange (de-politicisation for presence in the social sphere) resembles a game with the winner gaining a zero amount when the area of social CSOs technically exists and even develops to some extent. However, these organisations remain hostages of the state as subordinate and dependent entities. (The level of dependency is not the same for all and may vary from organisation to organisation).

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