

Mediation of “civil society” in the Belarusian press 2000–2010: between “heteroglossia” and “monologism”

Abstract

The article is primarily concerned with evaluating existing discourses on “civil society” as mediated in the Belarusian press. Drawing on the notion of “dialogue” derived from Bakhtin’s studies, it aims to report on the multiplicity of voices that formed and informed “civil society” discourse. It also attempts to investigate how the conceptualisation of “civil society” shifted over time and in response to contextual conditions. By highlighting the differing semantics attributed to the concept of “civil society” when used in the Belarusian press, my article aims to emphasise the polysemic nature of the term, which allows it to be used by forces from opposite sides of an ideological spectrum. Therefore, while the use of the concept can engender ideas that foster the promotion of democracy, it can also provide an ideological basis for non-democratic regimes.

Introduction

The contemporary articulation of the idea of “civil society” is predominantly associated with a liberal-democratic position on the nature of society and its relationship with the individual and the state. The position emphasises “society as a self-regulating realm, the ultimate repository of individual rights and liberties, and a body that must be protected against incursions of the State” (Seligman, 1992:11). “Civil society” is seen as the key to fostering democracy, good governance, and a better society (Diamond, 1994; Robinson & White, 1998; Edwards, 2005). However, what this perspective misses is that while the use of the concept underpins ideas that facilitate the establishment and development of democracy, it can also serve as a tool for non-liberal regimes. Drawing on this perspective, I am going to demonstrate that “civil society” can be appropriated for various purposes not only in Western-European democracies, but also in non-liberal environments, such as Belarus. I will place emphasis on the role of the media in such appropriation. The media will be understood as a powerful domain in the production of societal meanings, resulting from the mediation between various actors, under the influence of socio-political events.

The media's ability to reinforce the political agenda by re-articulating specific viewpoints will be highlighted in this article. This perspective is useful in demonstrating that the term "civil society" is not an objective, ready-made category, but is subject to processes of interpretation and contextual use. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1981:401) stated,

[w]hen we seek to understand a word, what matters is not the direct meaning the word gives to objects and emotions – this is the false front of the word; what matters is rather the actual and always self-interested use to which this meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker's position (profession, social class, etc.) and by a concrete situation. Who speaks and under what conditions he speaks: this is what determines the word's actual meaning.

In view of this, this article will address the following questions. What contextual factors influenced the chosen use of the term "civil society" in the Belarusian press between the years 2000 and 2010 and the underlying purposes behind these choices? What mediating practices were involved in this use? What impact did these contextual factors and practices have on the meaning of the term "civil society"? To answer these questions, I will employ a number of theoretical tools briefly outlined in the following subsection.

A brief note on the method: the notion of Dialogism

The Belarusian public space is frequently described through the binary categories of "official" and "alternative" public spheres (Manaev, 2003; Bekus, 2010), thus emphasising the polarised environment in which the media and society function. Whilst it is crucial to acknowledge the conflicting and polarised nature of the Belarusian public sphere, in which publics are presented with two separate (or, indeed, multiple) realities, such a perspective fails to provide in-depth analysis of the interactions between the spheres. The two realities do overlap and it is important to consider the complex diversity of voices and relations present within the media space. Therefore, assuming that media text is a complex mixture of voices, I find it useful to approach the media space through a number of notions originating from Bakhtin's writing. Drawing on the dialogic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and Valentin Vološinov (1973), in my analysis of media discourse I engage with complex metalinguistic mechanisms, such as "heteroglossia" and, "centrifugal" and "centripetal" tendencies, style and "voicing" that allow me to approach media text as internally dialogical¹ (Bakhtin, 1981; also see Lee, 1992; Fairclough, 1995).

¹ Bakhtin (1981) and Vološinov (1973) approached dialogue in a broad sense, as "not only direct and viva voce verbal communication between two persons" (Vološinov, 1973:113). The authors recognised the property of a discourse to contain many voices, or view-points, one's own and voices of others, referring to it as a "double-voiced" (Bakhtin, 1981:429) discourse. It is a "potential dialogue" (Bakhtin,

Discursively, the public space is represented by a multiplicity of specialised languages, accents and viewpoints, the discursive practice referred to as “heteroglossia” (*raznorečie*) by Bakhtin (1981). Such a multiplicity of voices and points of view engage with each other in a dialogic way sometimes producing tensions and contestations, and thus generating shifts in meanings. Acknowledging the power relations embedded in media is crucial to comprehending these dialogic processes. I suggest that power is embedded in Belarusian media in a less naturalised way, when compared to Western media. This straightforward presence of power, represented by “centripetal” forces (producing “centralising”, “unitary”, “official” discourses) and “centrifugal” forces (producing “decentralising”, diverse discourses associated with different genres, social groups, views and evaluations), produces a more explicit struggle over the production and reproduction of forms and meanings. The latter constantly evolve and are context specific. Accordingly, I assume, there is no single “civil society” discourse or point of view, rather there are several overlapping discourses² loosely described as democratic, nationalist, neo-liberal and official, that engage and often struggle with each other in a dialogic manner, thus impacting the term’s meaning. In each case the re-articulation of the term “civil society” can be regarded as an “index of social change” (Vološinov, 1973) constituting a dynamic in social, political and cultural life.

Because of its multi-accentuality and multiplicity of voices, “heteroglossia” is frequently described as an ideal speech situation due to its potential for diversifying social life and, potentially, for facilitating its democratisation (Hirschkop, 1999; Clark & Holquist, 1984). Drawing on Bakhtin’s notions of “style” and seeing the distinction between monologism and dialogism, Ken Hirschkop (1986; 1999) made a further claim that the style and structure of language is of relevance in a discussion on democracy and culture. According to the author, cultural forms are democratic not only when discourse is unconstrained by overt political control or when they see mass participation but “by virtue of the specific kind of ‘communicative action’ they enjoy” (Hirschkop, 1986:111). Accordingly, “heteroglossia” represents a dialogic style of communication that is juxtaposed to the ruling “monologism” of the official sphere, which enacts centralising tendencies and domination. “Heteroglossia” is “aimed sharply and polemically against the official languages”, against “a unitary language” imposed from above to ensuring the “maximum of understanding” in social life, and acting as “a force for overcoming heteroglossia” (Bakhtin, 1981: 272–273). In this view, “heteroglossia” constitutes a discursive domain of

1981:325) within a single utterance in which speakers may reproduce the voices of others through an act of appropriation, the property termed ‘intertextuality’ by Julia Kristeva (1986).

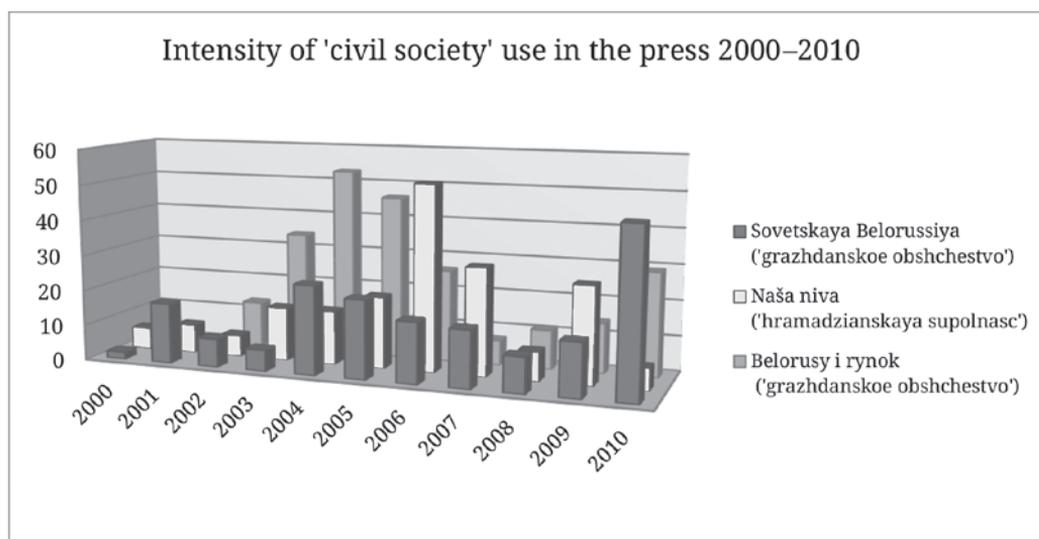
² Discourse is understood here firstly, in general terms as defined by John Dryzek (2006:1), “a shared set of concepts, categories, and ideas that provide its adherents with a framework for making sense of situations, embodying judgements, assumptions, capabilities, dispositions, and intentions”. Secondly, a more narrow understanding is utilised, that is the ability of discourse to provide legitimacy to particular forms of knowledge and political practices (Jackson, 2008).

civil society. One of the ways to explore this domain involves invoking different “voices”, i.e. positions, evaluations, and views, and the way in which these viewpoints are reported. The exploration of reported speech is pertinent to such analysis.

Adhering to this methodological framework, I will aim to investigate the dialogism within the Belarusian media space of relevance to the term “civil society”. Dialogism in media discourse is understood as the argument in utterances which occurs on an ideational and discursive level across multiple sources of the press, over time and space, and between persons, who are not necessarily present at a particular discursive event. I will compare the press reports of “civil society” with the original sources where possible and with other reports on the same issue from different sources while anchoring it in a broader socio-political context. I will examine the style and discursive practices employed in the mediation of “civil society”. This framework will be useful in demonstrating how the terminology of “civil society” became appropriated by various actors in the legitimation of political projects and practices in Belarus and how this appropriation was re-articulated in the press. To address these issues, I chose a diverse representative selection of Belarusian print media, because for most ordinary Belarusians the press represents the most accessible source of differing views on Belarusian society (see an opinion poll conducted in May 2011 atests).³ I have selected the state-run periodical *Sovetskaya Belorussiya – Belarus segodnya* (Soviet Belarus – Belarus Today), and a number of leading “independent” or “alternative” periodicals *Naša niva* (literally Our Soil), *Narodnaya volya* (People’s Will), and *Belorusy i rynek* (Belarusians and the Market). I also included data from *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta* (Belarusian Business Paper) from 2000–2004 to replace *Narodnaya volya*, due to the former’s limited online availability. The periodicals represent a diverse ideological spectrum of views – from national-democratic to neo-liberal. The term “independent” is used here to emphasise non-state ownership as the media’s real independence is questionable. The alternative press operates in a restrictive environment with the state exercising wide mechanisms of censorship (Richter, 2008; Aliaksandrau & Bastunets, 2014) even though the constitution prohibits this. Yet, the alternative press contributes to de-centralising tendencies within the bounds of an environment that attempts to marginalise and silence it.

A corpus of data comprising of articles containing the term “civil society” was created allowing me to process and analyse a vast amount of data, both qualitatively and quantitatively, by employing a combination of Content Analysis, Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. By grouping and categorising my data with computer assisted tools, I quantify and assess the relationship between coding categories as well as analysing the intensity (proportional to the number of references) and frequency (the number of articles or issues) of “civil societies” use in the periodicals over an extended period. My

³ <http://www.iiseeps.org/data11-151.html>.



quantitative data analysis revealed a proportional dependency in the use of the term “civil society” with periods that witnessed significant socio-political developments, as the following graph⁴ attests:

The years 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2010 proved to be important “milestones” in social and political life in Belarus, being associated with the presidential and parliamentary elections and the social activism linked to these political events. Therefore, in this article I will build my empirical evidence using data from the periods associated with vibrant electoral politics. The following sections will demonstrate how the term “civil society” was appropriated by the press in the early 2000s.

The appropriation of the term “civil society” in the press in the early 2000s

Official discourse: establishing “a practical consensus”

Evidence from the periodical *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* suggests that frequent references to the term by the periodical began in the early 2000s when “civil society” entered the vocabulary of the Belarusian government. Subsequently, its use saw significant increase,

⁴ Only three periodicals are represented in this graph, they were chosen because they allowed access to contiguous data over the period. The *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* dataset encompasses only those articles containing the term “civil society” with more than 50% relevance, as categorised by the periodical’s website. Data for *Naša niva* was generated from the Belarusian online library Kamunikat (<http://kamunikat.org/>). *Belorusy i rynek* provided a deep electronic archive allowing me to create the dataset from 2002 to 2010.

as the graph illustrates. “Civil society” entered the official rhetoric as a constituent of democratic discourse and as a normative ideal despite an environment that witnessed a general trend towards the curtailment of democracy and the regime’s growing control over the media, the persecution of civic activists and human rights violations⁵. During this period, however, the authoritarian regime was not fully consolidated and was described as employing a populist style of politics (Goujon, 1999; Dryzek & Holmes, 2002), “demagogical democracy” (Korosteleva, 2003), “façade democracy” (Gill, 2006); “defective democracy” (Beichelt, 2004). All of the terms can be associated with a framework of literature on hybrid regimes that emphasise the “selective use of liberalism” (Richter & Hatch, 2013) by non-liberal regimes. Initially, the term “civil society” was used in a context that presupposed the presence of intensive processes of state building, which at the official level was frequently claimed as democratic. As an example, in his address at the conference “On measures for solving problems of culture and arts development” on 10.02.2001, President Lukashenko stated:

Belarus is joining the new century as an established sovereign European state. [...] The essence of this moment is that we create our own statehood, statehood of a higher level. [...] The development of democratic institutions, the creation of civic organisations and associations – all this defines the contemporary image of Belarus. [...] The essence of civil society is not of confrontation, but of joint constructive work by public associations, movements, political parties and all branches of governance.

Governmental policy and rhetoric found resonance in the media’s content proving the periodical’s dependence on a central political agenda.⁶ The journalists’ adjustment to the official line was particularly noticeable during 2001, which saw the increasing use of the term in the periodical *Sovetskaya Belorussiya – Belarus Today*, as the graph attests, and an association can be drawn with the presidential election campaign culminating in Aleksandr Lukashenko’s re-election to a second term on September 9, 2001. The Belarusian officialdom claimed “a decisive victory, with 78 percent of the vote.”⁷ The official message was appropriated and circulated in the official press. In his article “Candid opinion” the journalist Maximov (13.09.2001) from *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* reported the following:

The past elections, which ended in the triumphal victory of the current President Aleksandr Lukashenko, marked a new stage in the development of our country’s civil society. The Presidential elections of 2001 entered the history of not only domestic democracy but also global democracy due to the fact that it was witnessed by an unprecedentedly large number

⁵ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2001/belarus>.

⁶ Refer to the article by Akimov, A. (15.11.2001) *The steps towards democracy [По ступенькам демократии]*. *Sovetskaya Belorussia – Belarus Today*. Available at: <http://www.sb.by/post/10870/>.

⁷ <http://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2003/belarus#.U0ajzFVdX40>.

of observers monitoring the transparency and fairness of the electoral process. [...] [One of the observers,] Prof Zakhariiev, the chair of the fund "Slavs", commented, "I was happy to see people taking the elections to heart. They clearly demonstrated their understanding that they are the real factor driving future political processes in the country".

The journalist conveys a peculiar vision of "civil society", in the sense of an electorate choosing and voting for the government. The indexical point "new stage of civil society development" indicates a divergence from normative models of civil society. Similarly to the notion of "democracy", "civil society" was attributed a particular meaning and function. The functional aspect of the use of the term was particularly salient in the context of electoral politics – it was a new "civil society" where the regime sought to gain legitimacy. The participation of people in elections and referendums was seen by officialdom as part of a processes contributing to the formation of civil society (see Pashkovskii & Parechina, 2003). The reporter internalised the official point of view, speaking with one voice with officialdom, that approaches "civil society" in terms of active voters and supporters of the regime. Together with assigning a positive stance towards the event, this position was further extolled by a third party – the journalist quotes directly one of the observers from Russia, Professor Zakhariiev, to add authority and trustworthiness to the report as well as to create a counterbalance to the Western observers' reports of election falsification. According to the OSCE, the elections failed to meet democratic standards with falsification of voting results, repression of political opponents, and restricted access to most media for opposition candidates.⁸

Without providing a concrete definition and at times demonstrating an uncertainty towards the meaning of "civil society", officialdom clearly came to recognise the term's pragmatic value; it became a source of legitimacy for the government both in the eyes of the Belarusian voters and the international community. Having adopted the non-coercive practice of the selective use of democratic rhetoric, the aim behind the strategy was to generate a constituency for the regime. As Andrew Wilson (2011) observed, Lukashenko's support by the general populace was essential during this period. He still faced a credible opposition with dissent present even at higher levels of authority. The opinion of the international community also proved to be significant for the regime. Officialdom therefore employed the strategy best described as the appropriation of discursive capital to gain legitimacy, derived from Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) framework. As Bourdieu stated,

[r]ecourse to a neutralised language is obligatory whenever it is a matter of establishing a practical consensus between agents or groups of agents having particularly or totally different interests. This is the case, of course, first and foremost in the field of legitimate

⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1066125.html>.

political struggle, but also in the transactions and interactions of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1991:40).

Accordingly, the officials supported by the press made use of discourse that emphasised democratic governance, human rights and emerging civil society, a language associated more with the pro-democratic opposition and civil society, whilst placing the alternative voices beyond the boundaries of consensus. Such a discourse model, based on the rhetoric of civic and legal rights with intertextual links to the Constitution,⁹ frequently invoked by official voices in the press, is difficult to challenge and is hard to reframe. If establishing “a practical consensus” proved ineffective, then coercive practices were used, ensuring the dominance of centralising tendencies, as will be further demonstrated.

Alternative uses of “civil society”: politicisation of the discourse

References to the term “civil society” were equally prevalent in the content of the alternative press during this period. At the turn of the century numerous NGOs sided with the political opposition, demonstrating the rise of civic resistance and the politicisation of civil society against the centralising, undemocratic, tendencies that had begun to be manifest in the second part of 1990s as Lukashenko’s government re-introduced authoritarian order (Čavusau, 2007). The politicisation of civil society was frequently acknowledged in the alternative press, as an extract from the article by Valer Bulhakau (2001, in *Naša Niva*) illustrates:

A serious reserve for the opposition, and this distinguishes it within the CIS area, is a wide spreading network of non-governmental organisations, in which many oppositional politicians find refuge. The consequences of the Belarusian authorities’ policies, concerned with ensuring their monopolising status in all spheres of social life, became the oppositional nature of the Belarusian “third sector”.

In such an approach to the idea of “civil society”, the boundaries between the notions of “opposition”, understood as a “political society” of “parties, political organisations and political publics” by Andrew Arato (Arato, 1993:314), and “associational life”, of civil society in Alexis de Tocqueville’s¹⁰ terms, were blurred. Indeed, some other examples from my dataset showed, the term “opposition” was frequently used interchangeably with

⁹ Refer to the article by Antonina Malivuk *Belarusian democracy: reality and hopes* [Белорусская демократия: реалии и надежды]. *Belorusy i rynek*, № 39 (368), 4–11 October 1999. Available at: <http://br.minsk.by/index.php?article=2053&year=1999>.

¹⁰ The notion stresses that autonomous voluntary organizations and associational activities are at the core of civil society, originating from the writing of Alexis de Tocqueville (for further reference see Cohen & Arato (1997)).

the terms “civil society”, “third sector” and even “*nezaležnae gramadztva*” (independent society in Belarusian), the term was predominantly found within the content of *Naša Niva* commencing from early 2000 until the present.¹¹ Often used alongside “*gramadzianskaja supolnasc*” (civil society in Belarusian), the notion *nezaležnae gramadztva* was anchored in the ideas of the National Revival Movement (*Adradženne*) of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the discourse emphasised the struggle for democracy and national self-determination, or *nezaležnasc* (independence in Belarusian). Use of the term “independent society” provided new ways of imagining community and societal interests, articulating a desire to have one’s own traditions and language within a democratic nation. Within this discourse, the Belarusian language and culture faced discrimination by the state, and as a consequence the survival and development of the Belarusian language became of concern to “independent society” (*nezaležnae hramadztva*)¹². Whilst internalising nationalist rhetoric, this perspective was also rooted in the dissidents’ language of freedom. Sometimes used alongside “free society” (*volnae gramadztva*), “independent society” (*nezaležnae gramadztva*), echoed the ideas of “alternative society”, to act freely in a repressive environment, “creating zones of increasing freedom,”¹³ this idea is rooted in the works of Polish intellectuals and activists associated with the *Solidarnosc* movement.¹⁴ Whilst emphasising national revival and at times producing tension with the Euro-centric principle of universality, this nationalising approach had a common vector with liberal discourse, where by both appear to represent a counterweight against the abuse of state power and a non-liberal regime.

The politicisation of civil society discourse was subject to transnational flows of information. The periodicals quoted intensively the voices of representatives from international organisations such as the UN, PACE, and OSCE. During this period, the voice of the former Chair of the OSCE Advisory-Monitoring Group in Belarus, Ambassador Hans-Georg Wieck was particularly prominent (as an example, his name appeared 55 times in 143 articles containing references to the term “civil society” in *Belorusskaya*

¹¹ The term was introduced and utilised by Andrej Dynko, who became *Naša Niva*’s Editor in Chief from 2000. In my online interview (04/10/2014), Andrej Dynko explained that he sought a clear term, understandable by the readership, because the term “*gramadzianskaja supolnasc*” (civil society) was “too scientific” for the average reader. The original meaning of the term “independent society” implied a part of society independent from the regime. The term “*nezaležnae hramadztva*” was well-received and therefore became established and developed. Used by both, journalists and readers, it acquired new connotations and overtones.

¹² Pečanko, S. (2010) *Ten Years since speaking Belarusian* [Дзесяць гадоў як беларускамоўныя] *Naša Niva* (4) January, 2010 Accessed at http://kamunikat.org/nn.html?pub_start=720&pubid=19034.

¹³ “*Nezaležnae hramadztva*” aimed at “non-political democratic struggle, the search for ways to freedom and the enlargement of space for free society in an un-free country” (Yankevič, in *Naša Niva*, 2006).

¹⁴ It was presented in Adam Michnik’s work, “The New Evolutionism” (cited in Goldfarb, 1998).

delovaya gazeta over the period 2000–2004). On the brink of the 2001 elections, Wieck made attempts to consolidate the opposition, which was divided on numerous issues in respect to the country's future course, or as stated in a report by the OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission, (2001:3) “to develop a political culture of cooperation and a capacity to compromise.”¹⁵ As a result of this initiative, a cross party civic coalition¹⁶ emerged which included the Belarusian National Front (led by Viačorka), Belarusian Social-Democratic *Hramada* (union), United Civil Party, the Belarusian Women's Party *Nadzeja* (Hope), supported by the Assembly of Pro-Democracy NGOs in the Coordinating Rada (Council) of Pro-Democracy Forces, together with a democratic initiative Charter-97. In his reports, often quoted in the alternative press, Wieck welcomed and acknowledged the emergence of a coalition within civil society, and saw it as a political force striving for democracy, as Extract 4 from the article by Dziadok (2002, in *Naša Niva*) attests:

As H.G. Wieck outlined in one of his interviews with Naša niva The coalition of national and democratic forces that act in opposition to the president is a new phenomenon for Belarusian political culture. [...] Political parties, independent from Lukashenko, non-governmental organisations and independent media play a great role in fighting for democracy in Belarus'.

The extracts demonstrated, the OSCE Chair approached the politicised civil society as an essential part of democratic development and this position was internalized by multiple sources in the alternative press. Great effort was placed in galvanising political forces during the parliamentary and presidential elections. Sometimes, this mobilisation invoked a “war” metaphor (“fighting for democracy”; “democratic forces”), which is the very nature of political struggle. Other examples found within my database, however, revealed tensions with the OSCE Chair's position. As an example, in her article Olga Abramova (05.03.2004, in *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*), a political scientist and a member of Belarusian House of Representatives took a critical stance with regards Wieck's position, referring to it as “Dr. Wieck's Doctrine”. The phrase embraced in quotation marks, ceases to be a semantically neutral phrase, as it acquires a critical connotation that distances the author from the initial point of view. The author expresses direct criticism of the “top down” approach and conditionality attached to the policy of civil society's development proposed by the international community. She appeared to represent a sceptical view towards the approach proposed by the OSCE Chair, convinced

¹⁵ OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission (2001:3) Republic of Belarus. Presidential Election, 9 September 2001. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights: Warsaw. Available at: www.osce.org/odihr/elections/belarus/14459.

¹⁶ See Čavusau (2007) for further references.

that “the change of the regime” is only possible via the consolidation of the country’s oppositional forces.

The response by officialdom to this politicised rhetoric was rather predictable, becoming a pivotal point in the confrontation between officialdom on one side and the OSCE and the Belarusian opposition on the other. Stylised in the traditions of Cold War propaganda, the article “Operation ‘White Stork’: Foreign Intelligence Forces against Belarus”, was published in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* (05.09.2001) on the brink of the Presidential elections. In the best tradition of the spy genre, the periodical provided a report portraying H.G. Wieck as a conspiring enemy, with the Belarusian opposition supporting this conspiracy. Such a framing strategy, which aimed to deconstruct pro-democratic civil society and the opposition, contributed to the centralising tendencies in the country. Despite the efforts to mobilise civic society, the pro-democracy NGOs and opposition groups failed to achieve their goal of delivering democratic change. Around 3.000 people gathered in October Square in Minsk to protest against the allegedly unfair elections, however, the protest was brutally dispersed.¹⁷ The government announced its intention to close the Minsk mission of the OSCE unless it showed greater respect.¹⁸ Mission Chair Hans-Georg Wieck left the country in December 2001 and the OSCE’s rhetoric appeared to become less confrontational thereafter.¹⁹ After the elections, the government changed its discursive strategy, ensuring that the “democratic façade” would not place the stability of the regime at risk, as the next section will demonstrate.

“Civil society” and the “Public Square” in the context of the electoral politics 2004–2006

The (re-)construction of official “civil society”: “pillars of the state”

Commensurate with the president’s second term, the government launched a mechanism aimed at consolidating presidential power. This included governmental attempts to impose stricter control over civil society and to restructure the Belarusian “third sector” by launching a further round of a re-registration campaign; the aim being to transform the

¹⁷ The Human Rights Centre Viasna (2001) Review-Chronicle of Human Rights Violations in Belarus in 2001. Minsk. Accessed on 17/05/2014 at https://spring96.org/files/reviews/ru/2001_review_ru.pdf.

¹⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1101158.html>.

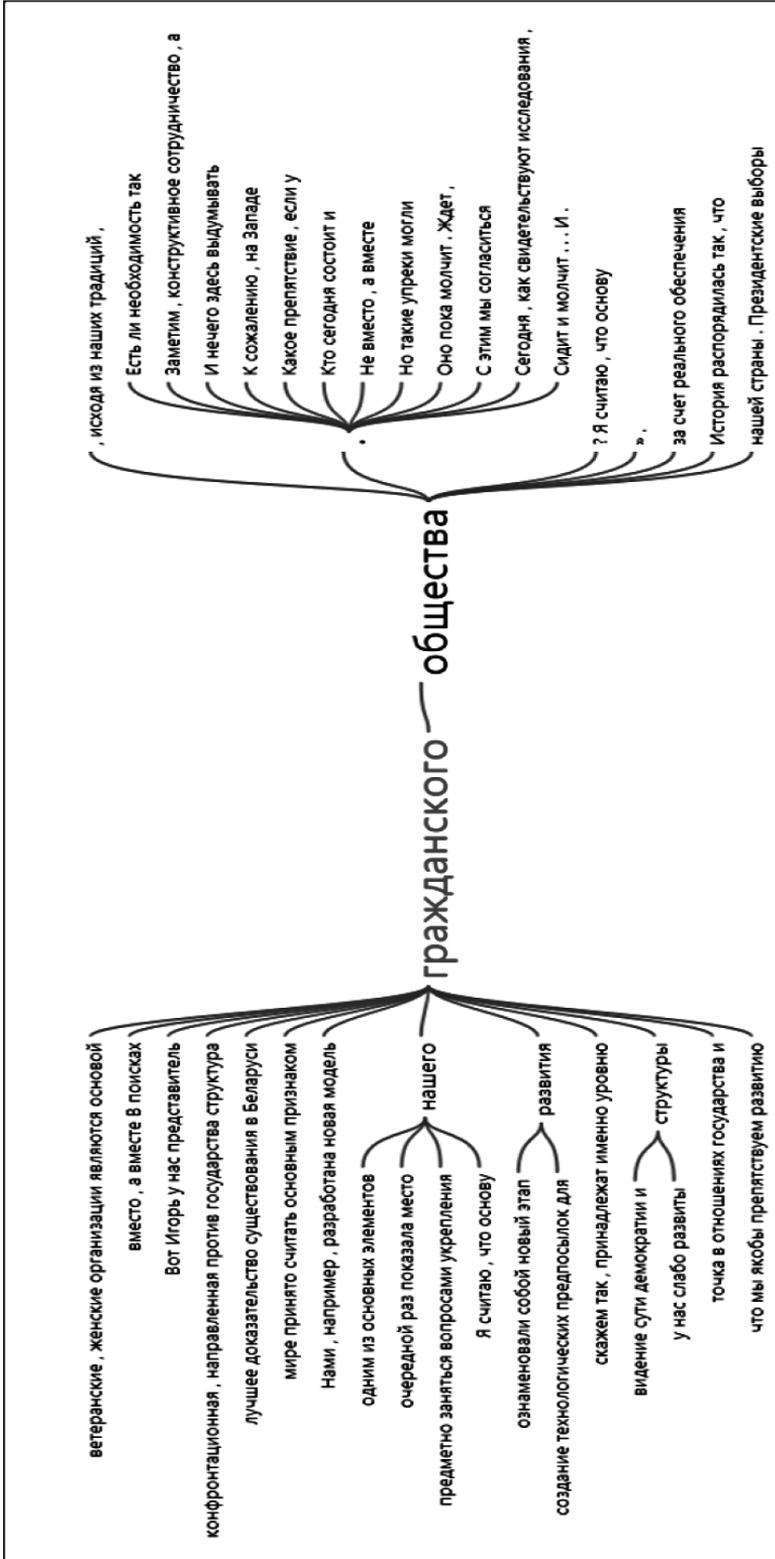
¹⁹ See, for example, Belarusians and the Market (2003) “Haiken: *Belarus will not remain outside common development tendencies*” [Хайкен: «Беларусь не останется вне общих тенденций развития»] № 24 (557) 23–30 June. Available at: <http://br.minsk.by/index.php?article=18933&year=2003>.

nature of the Belarusian civic sector.²⁰ The overall goal was to create an alternative to pro-democratic civil society that would act as a legitimising force for Aleksandr Lukashenko's political regime whilst eliminating the most viable and organised oppositional NGOs. Following a period of ambiguity in the use of "civil society", officialdom was becoming more assertive in its own vision of "civil society", as the following word tree demonstrates.

This is only an extract of a diagram representing concordances of the term in official discourse over the period. I will summarise the most important presented segments. Firstly, the content present in the tree diagram emphasises "the new model" which is context-specific ("based on our traditions"). It acknowledges a "new phase in development" that presupposes "constructive cooperation" between the state and society. It provides a robust definition of the term ("...war veterans", women's organisations are the foundation of "civil society"). The possessive pronoun "our", the node containing four links, accentuates on one hand, the "uniqueness" of the Belarusian concept and, on the other hand, contrasts it to other models.

The rigid definition of "councils, labour unions, youth, veterans and women's organisations" seen as "pillars of the state", a phrase attributed to the president (see Extract 5), saw increasing use in the content of *Sovietskaya Belorussiya*. It appeared six times in my search within five sources as a direct quote (variants were excluded from the count). Officialdom persistently saw "civil society" as a partner in a state-building project, the rhetoric also internalised elements of Soviet discourse. "Civil society" in this context was attributed particular values and ideals that demonstrated explicit divergence from earlier democratic discourse and Western models of "civil society". The idea of "civil society" in the Belarusian official media discourse, was understood as public associations cooperating with the government in the implementation of official policy rather than encouraging the diverse development of free and autonomous civic associations that function with the purpose of limiting, legitimising and controlling political power (Wood, 1990) together with solving social and economic problems. The regime saw public associations as a constituent component of the regime, rather than a domain separate from the state, whilst denying them autonomy and political agency, making them materially and strategically dependent. Notably, the term "non-governmental organisation" rooted in Western discourse, that intrinsically encompasses the idea of autonomy from the state, is predominantly used to refer to international or western-funded pro-democracy

²⁰ Andrew Wilson (2011:216) provided a comprehensive summary of this campaign. The crucial points are as follows: following President Lukashenko's rise to power in 1994–1995, the authorities made their first attempt at reducing the influence of the third sector. However, after this first wave of reforms the sector was still large in number. A second and third campaign against civil society began in 1999 and in 2001 when the sector saw its greatest reduction, as many of the NGOs had openly supported the opposition. A fourth wave of reforms forced the re-registration of the NGO sector in 2003–2005 and with it, the closure of 347 organizations.



Word Tree: collocations of "civil society" in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya-Belarus Today*

organisations in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*²¹. The significantly more frequently used term “*obshchestvennye organizacii*” (public associations), taking roots in the Soviet tradition²², had a tendency to be used to refer to the institutions loyal to the regime (such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the successor of the Soviet *Komsomol*, the Belarusian Republican Pioneer Organisation and pro-governmental Trade Unions) as well as politically “neutral” associations and initiatives involved in welfare. Such a model is reminiscent of the Soviet “administered mass organisations”²³ rather than “associational life”²⁴ in the Western sense.

The repetitive use of the phrase “the pillars of the state” became widespread in the content of *Sovietskaya Belorussiya* during this period. Such a direct, monotonous use of authoritative speech was aimed at insuring “a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life” (Baktin, 1981:272), a practice that I refer to as “monologisation” of discourse which is indivisible from the wider processes of socio-political and cultural centralisation. The periodical reproduced the official point of view on “civil society” by quoting official policymakers and scientists. To ensure the unity of such ideological communication, there are some discursive practices that a reporter can deploy. The article by Lepeshko (in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* 29.09.2005) presents an example of a reporter’s assigned “active orientation” (Vološinov, 1973) towards the “other person’s speech”:

The idea announced by A. Lukashenko of the “pillars of the state”, represented by the strong labour union and youth movements (plus, of course, veterans and women’s organisations) is very attractive and is likely to find wide support within society.

The utterance internalises the quotation, which is partly demarcated by quotation marks. The reporter assigns a positive evaluative accent to the reported speech (“the idea... is very attractive”). The reporter further aligns the official point of view with wider society’s position (“the idea... is likely to find wide support within society”) contributing to the establishment of a centralised language.

The “monologisation” of civil society discourse was particularly pronounced during the mid-decade of the 2000s, associated with a number of security concerns triggered by the events known as the “colour” revolutions that took place in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), inspired by controversial presidential elections. Officialdom

²¹ The searches of term “NGO” (НГО in Russian) revealed 7 instances in 3 sources within 102 articles dated from 2000–2010 in my dataset; “non-governmental organisations” (неправительственные организации) – 21 instances in 7 sources respectively; “public associations” (общественные организации) – 80 instances within 27 sources.

²² On the notion “*obshchestvennyi*” refer to Kharkhordin (2005: 87–89). Also see Kasza (1995) with regards to *Soviet public organisations*.

²³ See Kasza (1995).

²⁴ Tocqueville, for further reference see Cohen & Arato (1997).

recognised the “pre-emptive”²⁵ and homogenising property of the term “civil society” in uniting the nation in the context of the threat of revolution. The media provided a clear-cut line between real “civil society” and “uncivil” society. In his interview with the chief editor of *Rossijskaya Gazeta*, Vladislav Fronin, which was also reproduced in *Sovetskaya Belarussiya* (29.12.2005), Aleksandr Lukashenko stated:

As for “revolutions”, they are not revolution. They are banal banditism, craftily implemented using Western money. [...] I reply to my opponents: “we see civil society differently”. We create it based on the main civic institutions. These are the largest youth organisations, labour unions, war veteran organisations and women’s organisations. I underline the largest and therefore mass organisations.

The authoritative word of the president is reported in a linear style (directly). It is a “double-voiced” (Bakhtin, 1981) discourse in which the alternative point of view (“revolutions” embraced in quotation marks) is confronted, negated and marginalised by invoking a criminalising discourse (“banal banditism”). The alternative idea of “civil society” is substituted by a subordinate of the regime, mass organisations. The juxtaposition of Us (pro-governmental organisations) and Them (opposition and pro-democracy NGOs), is intensified by the conspiratorial discourse used in portraying the West as an enemy supported by the opposition, a common practice in the official media to stigmatize pro-democratic civil society. By trying to monopolise the public sphere, the government endeavoured to preempt and, later, destroy the civic protests and activism associated with the “colour revolutions”, to secure support from the wider population and also from the Russian government. Putin’s regime similarly saw the revolutions as threat and was committed to preventing such a scenario both at home and in the CIS countries by providing financial and strategic support.²⁶ Interestingly, this period saw a rapid increase in the inclusion of Russian “official” sources reflecting on the idea of “civil society”. The Belarusian official media welcomed publications criticising pro-democratic civil society, colour revolutions and American interference in domestic politics. Notoriously, a number of articles by Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian political scientist and advocate of anti-Western views contributed to anti-globalisation discourse styled in the tradition of Cold War rhetoric, portraying pro-democracy NGOs as a conspiring “other”. To quote one such reference (Dugin, in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* 13.06.2006):

²⁵ On the notion of “pre-emptive” authoritarian practices see Silitski (2007), Korosteleva (2012).

²⁶ Andrew Wilson, (2011:210) stated: “Lukashenka sold himself to the Kremlin as a bulwark against the fear the Kremlin had sold itself of US-inspired colour revolution and as a testing ground for ‘counter-revolutionary technology’. Russia was happy to loan money, media support and the services of its ‘political technologists’ to stop the virus spreading”.

In the contemporary context, it is NGOs, public associations and funds that become the main conductors of globalisation and Americanisation. [...] In reality, we deal here with the intelligence activity in the era of the information society. Contrary to the traditional forms of espionage, their activity is carried out almost openly. We have seen the role non-governmental organisations played in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine.

By making these allegiances with Russian sources the periodical *Sovietskaya Belorussiya* aimed to increase its capacity for influence, ensuring the centralisation and unification of the public space.

In response to the monologic practices aimed at the monopolisation of the term “civil society” described above, a number of de-centralising, “centrifugal” (Bakhtin, 1981), discursive practices were used to confront the semantic unity imposed by officialdom. As an example, instances of the re-articulation of official definitions in an ironic manner were identified, as demonstrated in the utterance taken from the article *The Fourth Rome* by Sergey Nikoliuk (2003, in *Belorusy i rynok*):

It is the XXI century outside, but without any obvious reason and direct orders, civil society forms. Yes, yes, the civil society that ‘relies on the recently elected Council of Deputies, labour unions and the mighty youth organisations’.

Irony in this extract is based on repetition (re-quoting) with slight variation, or “re-accentuation” in Bakhtin’s terms (Bakhtin, 1981:419). The reporter “re-accentuates” the official voice by assigning an ironical stance to it through such linguistic mechanisms as hyperbola, “mighty youth organisation” and the repetition of the particle “Yes, yes” functioning as discursive markers allowing the reader to recognise that the meaning in the reproduced utterance is not the meaning implied in the original source. Therefore irony can be seen as an important means of de-centralisation and is constitutive of a discursive battle over the term and thus “open[ing] up a discursive space for new meanings to emerge dialogically” (Baxter, 2007:119).

“Public Square” and the new idea of “civil society”

Coincident with the third electoral campaign of the spring of 2006, a new idea of “civil society” became evident in the alternative press emphasising the importance of self-organising citizens and their ability to direct the country’s future development. The Presidential campaign resulted in Lukashenko’s re-elected for a third term. As a result, mass social protests took place in Minsk’s October Square expressing discontent and demanding change. As a result of the protests and increasing public activism, a number of journalists and intellectuals reported the emergence of a “new society”. There was a feeling that “something had changed in Belarusian society or in some part of it”, “something

had moved from the dead end” (Dynko, 2006 in *Naša Niva*). Through social networks, independent media, pro-democracy NGOs and youth movements, the public at large were able to assemble and demonstrate new ways of civic resistance. As Chief Editor of *Naša Niva*, Andrey Dynko (2006, in *Naša Niva*), stated, whilst reflecting on the events of 2006:

Spring 2006 impressed us with the high level of self-organisation seen in independent society (nezalezhnae gramadztva) in the capital. This was manifest by the establishment of the camp site, the organising of flash mobs, the spreading of information via the Internet and the organised mass support of political prisoners. Not only was this self-organisation the best ever [...], it also took some processes totally away from the control of the authorities. Surprising was the energy and re-generation of the protests.

In particular, the voices of a younger generation who embraced European values and supported democratisation lead to new “civil society” rhetoric, emphasising the idea of a self-organised society. The voices of young protesters and camp dwellers at the Square were quoted in the press, as the following example by Aliaksandr Klaskouski, (2006 in *Naša Niva*) illustrates:

Bi-polar scheme – political opposition against the regime – is too simplistic. October Square showed that civil society is emerging. As Stas Pachobut, pointed out, “it is not the parties” representatives or activists who are gathered here, but real European people.

“Civil society” as a term in this utterance focuses on the themes of the wider community in contrast to a rather “closed”, over politicised and at times monologic discourse of the political opposition. The slightly colloquial phrase “real European people” invokes the voice of a young person, representative of a new generation that enjoy European values. Such a polyphonic style of reporting contributed to the “dialogisation” and diversification, of “civil society” discourse, implying the emergence of a communitarian, “bottom up” model of “civil society” during the protests in the Square.

Framed within a narrative of “revolution”, the idea of “civil society” appeared to presuppose a rapid “extra-institutional mobilisation” (Arato, 1993:314), and the overthrow of the illiberal regime by non-violent means. It became a framework used by the political opposition and civil society to catalyse change in society during the electoral periods. This idea of a self-organising “civil society” was used by Aleksandr Milinkevich, a Presidential candidate and the Leader of the United Democratic Coalition who was widely cited in the alternative periodicals. The idea was used to mobilise civil society or as Milinkevich stated, the “most active part of society” (in Sadvovskaya, 2006, in *Belorusy i rynek*) and to galvanise civic resistance. However, the forms of a nascent civil society represented by societal self-organisation together with the apparent lack of a clear vision of the alternative political elite of how to use this spontaneous citizen activism in order to deliver democratic change,

proved ineffective against the overt coercion and “pre-emptive” measures employed by the regime.

Limited liberalisation: dialogic politics in the Belarusian press (2008–2010)

The elections of 2010 took place in a markedly different environment to those previous. The period of so-called “liberalisation” (Wilson, 2011) between 2008 and 2010 saw changes in foreign policy aimed at rebalancing the relationship between Russia and the West. The political environment was also influenced by the Eastern Partnership framework launched by the European Union, resulting in the establishment of a new platform for dialogue between the Belarusian government, civil society and Western institutions, who also attached some conditions on democracy and human rights (Korosteleva, 2009). This change in the socio-political context was reflected on a discursive level. A new emphasis was placed on the relationship between the state and “civil society”. The notions of “dialogue” and “partnership” between the government and the West and between the state and civil society, appeared frequently in the content of the periodical. The dialogisation was also manifest in the “style” of the discourse. In the Address to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly published in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, President Lukashenko (in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* 24.04.2009) proclaimed:

We need to encourage partnership between the state and public institutions. The more diverse the spectrum of these institutions, the more opportunities there are for the manifestation of the social activity of citizens.

The extract constitutes a shift towards a more “normative” understanding of “civil society”, which recognises the diversity of civic institutions and the need for citizen participation. The use of a more empowering reference, “citizen” as opposed to “people” (*narod*), frequently appropriated before, articulates new forms of relations between the state and society. The clearly confrontational manner observed in the earlier speeches of the president, now appear to have been replaced by a more dialogic style. The president’s point of view was appropriated by other officials whose voices were widely reported in *Sovietskaya Belorussia*. As Elena Kirichenko, the head of the NGO department at the Ministry of Justice, said in an interview, “citizens can voluntarily form public associations, [...] independent of the state’s authority” (Rud, in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* 16.12.2010). The vocabulary of democracy, human rights and civic participation once again became an important part of official discourse. As Sergey Martynov, the Minister of International Affairs, announced to the foreign media and *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* (31.07.2009):

Belarus will be working on reforms towards democracy, the development of civil society, freedoms for NGOs, supremacy of law and compliance of human rights, but according to those aspects that we consider important for ourselves.

The message is clearly addressed firstly, to the international actors and secondly, to a domestic audience. The demonstration of the willingness of the state to adopt changes towards democratisation can be interpreted as an attempt to appear more legitimate both in the eyes of the EU policymakers and the Belarusian citizens. The appropriation and circulation of forms and meanings originating from liberal democracies in the West, with the focus on the notion of “civil society”, serves as a signal for the promotion of partnerships with the international community. The use of “civil society” in universal terms of democracy and human rights, however, appear to be contested by the national framework, revealing tensions between normative and local (“empirical”) perspectives. The use of the pronoun “we” in an “exclusive” sense, exacerbated by “ourselves”, clearly indicates the intention of the Belarusian authorities to define “civil society” and its role in the country’s development in their own terms. Therefore, by reducing the room for the normative point of view, the authorities revealed tensions with the decentralising centrifugal forces associated with the Eastern Partnership’s agenda.

Similarly to *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, the responses found within the alternative press demonstrate a shift from earlier radical interpretations of the term as a counterweight to the regime, now, to a variety of differing meanings and tones, as the article, “The Assembly took ‘a second breath’” by Barbarich (2009, *Belorusy i rynok*) demonstrates:

The Assembly²⁷ passed a number of documents. In its Resolution it is pointed out that the third sector ‘with hope and moderate optimism welcomes the steps of the Belarusian authorities towards the rapprochement between civil society and the state, as well as Belarus’s aspiration to move closer to European standards.

As the extract demonstrates, the relationship between the state and civil society grew more amicable, with the two actors being portrayed on an equal footing. Anchored in the European Union’s agenda, the liberal-democratic perspective encouraged cooperation with the state and implied a less politicised, NGO-centric, version of “civil society”, echoing the EU definition of “civil society” (see European Commission, Concept paper, 2009:4)²⁸ and thus further distancing it from the political notion of “opposition”. However an air of strong scepticism remained with regards to the liberalisation of the regime (as an example, see Dynko (2010, in *Naša Niva*)). The limitations of this EU-centric model

²⁷ The Assembly of NGOs is one of the structures (together with the consortium “EuroBelarus”) who became representatives at the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

²⁸ European Commission (16/11/2009) “Civil Society Forum strengthens the Eastern Partnership”, IP/09/1715 Available: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-09-1715_en.htm?locale=en.

were partly acknowledged in the press, primarily due to it dismissing the communitarian (cultural) idea of “civil society” (see Yakavenka, 2010 in *Narodnaya Volya*).

On the brink of the Presidential election of 2010 the diversity of voices that formed the discourses on “civil society” were far from unified and represented a high degree of polemics – the discursive practice described by Bakhtin’s notion “heteroglossia” (*raznorečie*). There were multiple references to the terms “civil society”, “*nezaležnae gramadztva*”, “third sector”, “opposition”, and even to the neo-liberal ideas of “big society”²⁹ originally embraced by the UK Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties. By citing differing voices and constructing an array of identities and definitions, such as “the community of civic-minded [*neabyjakavyh in Belarusian*] people” (see Byanko & Sivets, 2010, in *Narodnaya Volya*); together with producing vibrant electoral campaigns such as “Tell the Truth!” or “For Free Belarus!” Belarusian journalists, intellectuals and the oppositional political elite contributed to the diversification and pluralisation of the public sphere. However, whilst such a diversity of social languages and points of view may constitute a plurality of opinions and a democratic culture, such a multi-accentuality may also reinforce the creation of multiple disunited publics, and consequently, lead to the fragmentation of civil society. Indeed, it is frequently acknowledged that Belarusian civil society is fragmented and divided. During the elections, the opposition and civil society failed to mobilise efforts to nominate a single leader and to provide a viable alternative to President Lukashenko. To quote *Naša Niva*’s Editor-in-Chief Andrei Dynko, “the opposition [was] going to the elections divided” (Dynko, in *Naša Niva*, 2010) as nine alternative candidates to the presidency, participated in the elections. Furthermore, such mediation may also bring difficulties resulting in an ambiguous and uncertain meaning of the notion of “civil society”³⁰ allowing it to be used by various actors for differing purposes. As a consequence it may have a detrimental effect on political culture and the development of civil society.

Furthermore, the alternative discourses proved not to be without bias. The well integrated culturally and politically minded community may be at risk of creating a non-inclusive, “monologic”, public space that is inclined to exclude those who do not share its political and cultural aspirations. The use of the term “*sviadomyja*” in the press demonstrates this well and may be representative of a divide in society. It also serves as a good example of how discursive tensions and struggles emerge over the understanding of what constitutes

²⁹ The idea of “big society” was a central point in the programme of the Candidate to Presidency Yaroslav Romanchuk in 2010, published in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* on 01.12.2010. Accessed on 18.09.2012 at <http://www.sb.by/politika/article/postroim-novoe-sokhranim-luchshee.html>.

³⁰ This assumption is partly acknowledged by (Yahorau & Vadalazhskaya, 2011:21). In their report the authors demonstrated that “the category of “civil society” remains rather vague and insignificant both at the level of public consciousness within the country and as a possibility of self-identification for the actors”.

“civil” society. In the alternative national-democratic discourse, the actors of civil society are frequently referred to as “civic-minded citizens” (*sviadomyja hramadziane*); a “civic-minded community” (*sviadomaja hramada*) (Klaskouski 2006, in *Naša Niva*). It is also used in collocation with other adjectives, such as “all free and civic-minded people of the country” (*svobodnyja i sviadomyja*); “civic-minded and educated Belarusians” (*sviadomyja i adukavanyja*) (Prof. Sakavik, 2009 in *Narodnaya Volya*), “intelligent people – civic-minded Belarusians” (reader Kozlova, 2010 in *Narodnaya Volya*). In other contexts, the term became associated with “nationally-minded”, “national-patriotic” people, the “nationally-conscious” part of Belarusian society. “Non civic-minded” (*ne sviadomyja*) are those who “believe the contemporary official propaganda”, (reader Zhukau 2008, in *Narodnaya Volya*). The construction of the notion is based around the opposition of two categories Us (politically- and culturally-minded Belarusians) and Them (an apolitical, nationally-indifferent populace), the categories contain an element of social stratum. As demonstrated, journalists, public intellectuals and scholars applauded the young, smart, IT-literate and well-educated protesters, who internalised national and democratic values, and portrayed them in heroic terms. Those who were not able to embrace liberal or national values were attributed negative qualities. Claiming this identity and constructing this social division creates a risk of alienating some Belarusian intellectual groups from “the people”, portraying them as Sovietised, denationalised and lacking strong political and cultural aspirations. The officialdom did not miss the opportunity to exacerbate this alienation. The Belarusian word “*sviadomyja*” can be frequently found in the official media where it is used to refer to the nationalist and democratic opposition in an ironic manner. Irony is achieved through the use of a Belarusian word in Russian text constituting a mocking repetition of someone’s speech. Quotation marks are always applied in such cases: “our very ‘intelligent’ and ‘civic minded’ (наших очень «грамотных» и «свядомых»)” (Lukashenko 2008, in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*). It is a strategy that Mary Talbot called “ironic double-voicing” (Talbot, 2007:65) drawing on Bakhtin’s dialogic principle. In this case, it is the use of the Belarusian language by Russian-speaking officials, quoted by the media, which becomes a means of expressing the hostility of the Belarusian-minded “minority” towards the rest of society. Such portrayal is used to distance the reader from a Belarusian national identity and helps to sustain this status quo of “otherness”, ensuring popular support for Lukashenko. It is not necessarily the language or culture that is ridiculed, rather the rhetoric is reminiscent of a “class struggle”³¹ between groups possessing different cultural and social capital. The alienation of the alternative “civil society” from “the people” (*narod*) is highlighted in *Sovietskaya Belorussiya*: “[t]heir real problem is that they are

³¹ On the “class” issue in Belarus refer to Elena Gapova (2010): *Anxious Intellectuals*. In Bradatan, C. & Oushakine, S. In *Marx’s Shadow: Knowledge, Power and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*. Lexington Books: Lanham.

too distant from the people (*narod*) and from real people's problems!" (Lukashenko, in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* 24.04.2009).

To conclude the subsection, hopes for change were unrealised following the presidential elections, as centripetal tendencies and coercive powers ensured that it was practically impossible for the opposition and civil society to challenge the regime of President Lukashenko.³² Having demonstrated a double standard in mediating "civil society" by embracing liberal-democratic rhetoric rooted in the ideas of a viable civic sector and good governance, such "dialogisation" once again appeared to be a pragmatic strategy used by officialdom to secure the space for manoeuvre between Russia and the West, which further provided viability for the regime.³³ After the protests in October Square in December 2010, the country's domestic and foreign politics remained strongly influenced by these events³⁴. The official media continued to extol the official point of view on "civil society". As an example, *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* quoted widely Anatoly Rubinov (in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* 22.12.2010), a well-known Belarusian ideologist, academician and Chair of the Republican Council, who called the protesters "destructive political forces" and "evil extremists". The alternative media responded in a dialogic manner by circulating counter-discourses and citing the voices of human rights activists and the cultural and pro-democratic community who embraced the ideas of solidarity with the victims of repression. This suggested that the battle for the ownership of "civil society" would continue in the contested Belarusian media landscape.

Conclusion

In summary, from the early 2000s Belarusian political elites set an intrinsically controversial goal of constructing "civil society" from above. Officialdom persistently saw civil society as a partner in a state-building project, metaphorically referring to pro-government civic organisations as "pillars of the state" with the aim of replacing the "politicised" structures of civil society. It was demonstrated that the official discourse of "civil society" was not so uniform, rather it was a hybridised discursive construct that internalised a mixture of discourses, from Soviet to democratic, circumscribed by a specific social and political context. The discourse manifested itself in deploying various forms of manipulation

³² http://n-europe.eu/article/2012/12/20/zneshnepalitychnyya_vyniki_2012_i_spadchyna_19_snezhnya.

³³ In Andrew Wilson's (2011) view, the "liberalisation" was an attempt to rebalance the regime's relationship with Russia and the West, the period is known for deteriorating relations with Russia. Lukashenko required just enough of the West in the political landscape to ensure Russia continued to subsidise his social model whilst ensuring the survival of the authoritarian regime.

³⁴ http://n-europe.eu/article/2012/12/20/zneshnepalitychnyya_vyniki_2012_i_spadchyna_19_snezhnya.

– from overt coercion to more consensual forms, with the aim of maintaining civic activism within official bounds. Framed as a part of democratic discourse, the term “civil society” either appeared to serve as a façade for policy or political project or it acquired context-specific meanings and connotations, at times almost contrasting its democratic origins. At the heart of these discursive transformations were strategies aimed at the monopolisation of the concept of “civil society” and the unification of “civil society” discourse. The way the term “civil society” was mediated in the official press during the period of investigation showed a high correlation between official policy and media coverage, highlighting the official press’s strong dependency on the government’s political agenda. The familiar Soviet approach of using the media as an instrument of ideological manipulation was reinforced, particularly during electoral campaigns, with journalists adjusting to the agenda and policy of government officials. Alternative voices were counteracted and marginalised, and thus disenfranchised from the production of “civil society” discourse in the official press. Such a close correlation between official policy and the discursive practice of the press contributed to the legitimisation of Lukashenko’s rule and the justification for the strengthening of the state, whilst effectively counteracting de-centralising, democratising, tendencies.

These official practices further provoked radicalisation in the non-governmental civic sector, which aligned with political parties in their struggle against the regime. In this context the concept was understood as a counterweight against the expansion and abuse of state power. Such “politicisation” of the term “civil society” occurred as a result of transnational influences in its mediation in the alternative press, which showed a strong tendency towards the inclusion of a political agenda in their content. Retaining an impartial attitude and balanced coverage towards the issue at times proved equally challenging. These re-articulations, were often shaped to form counter-strategies in an attempt to shape discourses and discursively struggle over the term “civil society” – a “struggle among social-linguistic points of view” (Bakhtin, 1981:273). Such a struggle can be further understood as the battle for social and discursive capital (Bourdieu, 1991). The heteroglossic nature of the alternative discourses was juxtaposed against the monologic style of the statist discourse. The diversification and pluralisation of the public sphere observed in the middle and at the end of the decade can be seen as indicative of an emergent civil society, understood as a self-organising realm of Belarusian citizens reinforced by the dynamic multiplicity of voices, accents, points of views present within the discourse. There was no uniform agreement regarding the concept of “civil society” and a certain level of polemics could be observed between the sources and even within a single source. However, it was also acknowledged that the alternative discourses should not be idealised. Over-politicising or over-nationalising “civil society” may lead to the monologisation of discourse. “Excessive” “heteroglossia” may create a “divided” civil society and ambiguity in the meaning of the term, which may have detrimental effects on civic activity and political culture.

The article also attempts to demonstrate the transnational influences mediating the concept of “civil society”. The construction of the notion was shown not to be an exclusively traditional process, nor was it entirely shaped by Western influences, as some may suggest. It was a process involving a complex set of discursive practices in which meaning was constantly negotiated and constructed by various actors in a dialogic manner within the space provided by the media. The dialogic practices, by their mere nature, overcome any binaries (e.g. official and alternative; western and local) in such a way, to paraphrase Ken Hirschkop (1999:262), that if considered separately, each discourse or point of view on “civil society” would constitute “its necessary unfinished character”. Therefore, it is possible to characterise the mediation of the term “civil society” as a transnational, continuous, and contextual negotiation and re-articulation between multiple voices. Importantly, the analysis of a number of reported utterances showed that by placing the term “civil society” in a new context and by infiltrating it with his or her own comments and interpretations, a reporter had the potential to generate the term’s polysemy. As Bourdieu (1991:40) pointed out,

Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us that, in revolutionary situations, common words take on opposite meanings. In fact, there are no neutral words. [...] [A]t the cost of the re-interpretation implied in the production and reception of the common language by speakers occupying different positions in the social space, and therefore endowed with different intentions and interests, it manages to speak to all groups and all groups speak it.

As a result, “civil society” became a term used by different actors for different purposes.

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