

## **Substitution of Civil Society in Belarus: Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations\***

The available scholarly work on the weak state of civil society in Belarus gives credence to this argument. Authentic, pro-democratic non-governmental organisations appear to be small in number, marginalised and with limited influence inside the country. At the same time, state administrative resources have witnessed substantial growth. The stronger position of the state (when compared to civil society) is due, in part, to its success in developing various levers of control to authentic civil society and the established pro-government “non-governmental organisations” (NGOs) loyal to the state. These operate without obstacles. This alignment allows NGOs to benefit from doing their work unhindered and extend the reach and type of activities they are able to carry out. As a result, civil society is divided, or polarised, with their relation to the state serving as the decisive dividing line between them.

This paper endeavours to provide a closer look at the extent to which the activities of pro-democratic organisations are copied by government-backed entities and to what extent the substitution of authentic civil society with government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) takes place. While membership in GONGOs is impressive, the extent to which the efforts to present themselves as civil society organisations can partly facilitate their popularity and supplant the work of real NGOs. Instances of imitating the activity of pro-democratic NGOs by organisations created by the government will be discussed and analysed. This paper is mainly based on statements and interviews from practitioners and experts in the field. This provides an additional practical dimension to the research conducted. The analysis identifies substitution in three dimensions (internal, external and mixed) and considers them separately in greater detail.

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## **The Operation of GONGOs in Belarus**

The existence of a significant number of GONGOs in Belarus is one of most important factors in understanding how Belarusian civil society operates and is an issue that has long been overlooked. GONGOs are organisations that require a certain degree of dependency on the state and often are created by it. Interestingly enough, a set of organisations defined as “state associations” or “state NGOs” exists in Belarusian law, but these are distinct. GONGOs receive substantial benefits from the state and, as such, they represent the GONGOs described here.

If one takes a closer look at GONGOs, naturally, they do not appear to be independent, as they are initiated from above, rather than from below. Apart from being created by the government, the organisations continuously align their work with that of the state. Therefore, they do not act in the name of protecting the public’s interests, but often embody a mechanism for additional governmental control over society. The Belarusian authorities reciprocate the loyalty of GONGOs through lifting obstacles which the organisations would otherwise face. Financial dependence also plays an important role, although some GONGOs are guided by the desire to receive financial support from sources other than the state.

Therefore, the main characteristics of a GONGO are the dependent mode of their creation, operation and decision-making, privileges of extended rights in comparison to other similar organisations, maintaining the role of an implementing agent of the state, rather than as an actor for civil society. The existence of this phenomenon echoes a common practice found during Soviet times when any volunteer state association that existed was, in fact, a body in support of the Communist Party.

The existence of pro-government organisations ensures greater control and better rule over society by the authoritarian state. These organisations can be established in different civil sectors and for different civil society groups to ensure state control. In these cases, space for authentic NGOs to function is significantly limited and can be further reduced by instituting legal regulations that make it harder for NGOs to operate. In Belarus the mandatory registration of organisations, in conjunction with the criminal liability one faces for acting in the name of an unregistered organisation, serves as mechanisms that hamper the work of NGOs.

Vitali Silitski made an important distinction between pro-democratic and pro-government organisations and argued that the ‘democratic’ NGOs specialise in public campaigns and seminars, while pro-government organisations are mostly represented in areas such as social projects, charity and leisure activities (e.g. festivals, contests). This is confirmed by a quick survey of the websites of two of the best known pro-government organisations – the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM in Belarusian) and Belaya Rus’. Although the total number of their members is remarkable for Belarus (they claim

to have 500,000 and 138,000 members respectively),<sup>1</sup> their websites are not particularly informative and mostly list leisure activities as their specialisation (e.g. organising cultural events, concerts, sporting events). These two organisations will be analysed further as the most obvious examples of GONGOs.

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) is the most well-known GONGO in Belarus. Its overall structure is comprised of other organisations, but no detailed information is publicly available. The creation of BRSM in 2002 was the result of a merger of two organisations, the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union and the Belarusian Union of Youth. Today BRSM brings together about 500,000 young people, ranging in age from 14 to 31 years old, and represents about 19% of the number of young people in Belarus.

The organisation attracts youth using financial incentives. Card-carrying members get discounts on products and services in more than one hundred retail outlets and service centres in Minsk alone. Outside Minsk, a system of discounts for BRSM members can be found at sport clubs and swimming pools as well as beauty salons, cosmetics shops, and printing and other services that are certainly appealing to most young people. It does not create equal conditions with other organisations which do not have the financial benefits to incentivise membership. In 2011 the BRSM received 20.5 billion Belarusian roubles (about \$6.6 million). This constituted 98% of the total of all the finance provided to implement youth policies in Belarus. In reality, the BRSM gets even more. On 13 January 2003, Lukashenka signed a decree which required that local BRSM branches were financed by the local authorities' budget. The government was also responsible for repairing the organisation's main office.

However, information about how exactly the money is being spent remains outside the realm of public discourse as it is not disclosed. Although the website of the Ministry of Education of Belarus lists 16 organisations that receive support from the government for their activities the aim of this support and the extent to which other organisations are supported remains unclear. BRSM is a vivid example of an organisation that receives money from the state budget, though formally it has the status of a public organisation and should be on equal footing with all other public youth organisations.

Much less is known about another recognised GONGO, Belaya Rus'. Their emergence followed the pattern established by the BRSM. It includes former ministers, including the ex-Minister of Education and the current Vice Chairman of the Presidential Administration, Alyaksandar Radzkou, members of Parliament, the rector of the Belarusian State Pedagogical University, Pyotr Kukharchyk and the rector of the Belarusian State Economic University, Uladzimir Shymau in addition to numerous other governmental officials. Almost all the senior management of the organisation (3 out of

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<sup>1</sup> See more at the official web site of Belarusian Republican Youth Union at <http://brsm.by/> and Belaya Rus' at <http://www.belayarus.by/> [accessed 17 December 2013].

4 vice-chairmen) have worked in the House of Representatives (i.e. the lower chamber of Belarusian Parliament between 2008 and 2012). The website of the organisation specifies a membership of 148,000 people (as of 1 Nov 2014) and lists several organisational activities. However, its real function is similar to that of the BRSM.

To sum up, GONGOs were created to complement government activities and function as state actors, enjoying extended rights in comparison to other organisations in Belarus, rather than as representatives of authentic civil society.

## **State Corporatism in Belarus**

In theoretical conceptualisations of authoritarianism studies the use of officially sanctioned public organisations to restrict people's participation in political processes is referred to as state corporatism where corporatism is defined as a:

*System of interest representation, in which the constituent units are organised into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognised or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports Schmitter Philippe. Still the country of Corporatism. Review of politics Vol. 36.1, p. 93.*

Originally elaborated to describe the interaction between the state and economic interest groups, the model almost immediately began to be used to analyse other interested groups, such as NGOs. Under this model, the state sets strict conditions for granting organisations permission to operate. The authorities also suppress authentic civil society groups. Such dependency reduces the number of such organisations, allowing the state to monitor their activities and supervise their members. This practice is evident in Belarus through its official state policy towards NGOs and democratic civil society. Restrictions on the representation of real interests in Belarus and its various limitations can be traced along two veins of thought for maintaining state control. Firstly, the neutralisation, or limitation of opportunities for public activities of independent NGOs, with the most advanced NGOs being excluded entirely from operating. This is made possible through impediments to registration and limited possibilities inside the country to advocate civil society causes (due to restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly). Secondly, the creation of GONGOs and other public society organisations by the government that replace authentic NGOs and promote state policies in their respective segments of society.

A considerable number of public organisations in Belarus do not just work closely with government agencies, but are incorporated into them and depend almost entirely on the will of the political elite. As a result, the sector of society originally meant to be an arena

for civil society is being intensely incorporated into the state, creating a “hybrid state-public sector”. One of the consequences of this blend of the state and civil society is seen in data from two opinion polls from 2005 and 2010, which give light to society’s eroding perception of NGOs. Three important trends can be outlined:

*A lack of understanding of NGOs role and function and an absence of knowledge about the problems faced by civil society. The public does not see the need to protect public interests through participating in NGOs and supports the introduction of stricter controls over the activity of NGOs.<sup>2</sup>*

There is a lack of knowledge about NGOs. In 2005 only 30.7% had formed an attitude (either positive or negative) towards NGOs, while the rest (69.3%) did not explicitly relate to the role of civic, or non-governmental organisations in Belarus.<sup>3</sup> Another study from 2010 shows that 44% of respondents said they did not know what an NGO is.<sup>4</sup> In the 2010 survey most respondents to the openended questions named only the BRSM, Belaya Rus’ and the Consumer Rights Protection Society, whilst references to names of pro-democratic NGOs were negligible.<sup>5</sup>

The poll shows the “voluntary” sector is either not viewed as part of “civil society” (the “voluntary” sector is understood as organisations loyal to the state), or “civil society” is only viewed as “democratic civil society” (with progovernment organisations excluded from it). The mixture of “democratic” and “pro-government” factions in a single civil community is confusing for the public. Another example from the 2010 study shows that about 40% of people surveyed said that NGOs should be of assistance to the state and act as a state agent. It is fair to state that this is typical of people’s understanding of NGOs in Belarus.

The data illustrates in Belarus is reviving the old corporatist system of state-civil society relations.

## **State Relations with GONGOs and NGOs**

Civil society as a public sphere of citizens engagement, and a way for individuals to organise themselves to voice their interests in different areas, is often considered to be an agent of society that is independent of the state. The current classical understanding

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<sup>2</sup> Chavusau, Yury, 2005. *Iiramadskija abjadnanni: ich rolia II sucasnym hramadstvie*, *Analitycnaja zapiska pa vynikach nacyjanalnacha sacyjalagicnacha apytannia*, Minsk, September.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> *Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs and Eastern Europe Studies Centre, Non-governmental organisations: their role in the modern Belarusian society, Briefing note on the results of a national poll*, 2010, Minsk.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

of civil society assigns it to a “third sector”, as opposed to the state or market. However, in Belarus the rules of the game for civil society are drawn up almost exclusively by the state. Thus the state indirectly influences civil society while depriving the latter of such an opportunity. As closer ties with the government can bring tangible benefits for organisations, the extent to which they are tied to, or dependent on the government, is important. A variety of patterns of relations between the state and GONGOs and NGOs should be reviewed emphasised.

The relations between civil society and government can be characterised in different ways: non-interventionist, active encouragement, partnership, co-option or control. For individual NGOs the most favourable policy setting is when legal restrictions are minimised and they have complete freedom to receive funds from whomsoever they choose, to speak out and to associate freely. Belarus’ NGOs do not enjoy these rights, as the state has a control-based relationship with society. The state executes control through a pervasive ideology, the dominance of media, repression of political activists, non-acceptance and suppression of any form of civil discontent. Numerous obstacles for the operation of NGOs, including the infamous article 193.1 of the Criminal Code of Belarus, exist. Simply put, this article stipulates that activities of unregistered organisations are subject to criminal liability.

The creation of GONGOs extends possibilities for their government-controlled operators and, in particular, provides access to these external funds. There has been a steady increase in donor assistance to civil society in Belarus. The EU and the United States have increased financial assistance for the “Governance and Civil Society” sector after the 2010 presidential election. The EU increased its aid by a magnitude of 1.5 and the United States by 12%. This trend was clearly observable already in 2010, when donors such as the United States, Germany, Sweden and France significantly reduced the distribution of aid through government institutions and appealed to civil society instead. In 2006, for example, twice the amount given in 2010 was allocated to the public administration than was provided to civil society. In 2011 eleven times more funding was allocated to civil society compared to the amount of funding for the government.<sup>6</sup>

The state has more favourable attitude towards GONGOs, as opposed to NGOs, is that it gives the state a chance to shift some of its own workload from the state level to their sponsored organisations. In the same time it would undoubtedly be wrong to think that every act of cooperation with the state makes an organisation pro-government. The extent of independence that an organisation is ready to maintain in exchange for said cooperation is pivotal. For some organisations state cooperation, and even support from

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<sup>6</sup> Shylo, Karina and Egorov, Andrei, 2013. *Rol’ i mesto grazhdanskogo obshchestva v sisteme donorskoi pomoshi ES dlia Belarusi*, Rabochiy document.

the state, appears to be a leading principle when they are considering the work they wish to conduct working with the disabled or socially marginalised groups.<sup>7</sup>

The state allows for some topics to be open to real cooperation (e.g. the environment), but also denies others that encroach on its own mandate such as, for example, electoral reform. At the same time this cooperation is fragile and does not eliminate the same problems organisations had prior. Nor does it ease the burden of operating under unfriendly conditions. Thus, the same organisation may successfully cooperate with the state on one issue and have the completely opposite result on another matter. A vivid example can be drawn from ecological NGOs when a successful campaign on draining swamps was followed by a campaign against a nuclear power plant which encountered serious pushback from the authorities and zero state cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

## **Is There a Substitution?**

As described, Belarus employs control-based relations with civil society and has revived a state corporatist model. In this section we will consider the most recent evidence in Belarus when GONGOs were acting as representatives of pro-democratic NGOs or had the intention to be perceived as such, which will be analysed as a tool to identify instances of substitution. These cases are grouped into three categories. These include instances of the creation of official organisations and structures that are counterbalancing the activity of independent pro-democratic NGOs; cases when GONGOs, or their representatives participate in providing evaluations of civil society in Belarus; and reports on instances when GONGOs received funding intended for pro-democratic NGOs, all of which will be presented below.

## **Creation of “Official” Organisations to Counterbalance Democratically Oriented NGOs**

Often authoritarian states create organisations to counterbalance and “mirror” the activity of pro-democratic NGOs. Formal NGOs that exist only on paper were also created during the Soviet Union, so the phenomenon is not totally new. One of the earliest examples of simulative organisations in the history of independent Belarus occurred back in the early 1990s, when GONGOs were established to take the money devoted to fighting the consequences of Chernobyl and aid programmes were “governmentalised”. The same followed with programmes involving the competence of structures of (e.g. border guard

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<sup>7</sup> Tatsiana Pashevalava, Interview #1, 2013 and Yury Chavusau, Interview #6, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Tatsiana Pashevalava, Interview #1, 2013.

equipment, fighting trafficking in people and drugs). The government created sham organisations which existed only on paper and were composed of state officials.<sup>9</sup>

Such examples have also occurred in other countries. In Slovakia, for example, during the Meciar times in the mid-1990s, civil society was seen as a threat and GONGOs were commonly used to ensure better governmental control over civil society. Such was the case with youth organisations, where the independent Youth Council of Slovakia was confronted by the Slovak Youth Congress, which was comprised of representatives of the youth structures of the ruling coalition under Meciar. A similar situation involved the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists and the Association of Slovak Journalists. One of the most significant examples of organisations that mirror the activity of NGOs are those organisations devoted to young people, including the BRSM, the National Council of Youth and the children's organisation "Rada".

The national Council of Youth and children's organisation "Rada" served as an umbrella organisation, uniting both registered and unregistered associations under a platform for dialogue with a good balance of representation from various groups. The BRSM, after its creation in 2002, aspired for membership in Rada. Due to a vote during one of its meetings, Rada rejected the application to avoid the monopolisation and "governmentalisation" of activities pertaining to the nation's youth. Following that decision, Rada and its members encountered pressure and criticism. The President himself, during his annual address in 2003, spoke on the growing importance of the nation's youth and the importance of the state in developing the potential of young people:

*A significant role has to be played by the Belarusian Republican Youth Union. It should reveal itself as a genuine organiser, leader of the youth movement in the country. Instead, BRYU, right after its creation fell under the umbrella of the so-called Rada. A huge organisation went under some kind of worn-through umbrella...*

Prior to that, Rada had some cooperation and dialogue with the state, however since 2003 communication has stopped. From 2003 until 2006 the state actively exerted pressure on the members of Rada until they were either abolished or had withdrawn their membership. Of the 30 organisations comprising Rada, around only seven members were left by 2006. A lawsuit against Rada was then filed. Its accounts were frozen, and the organisation was officially closed in 2006 after its registration was recalled.

After the elimination of Rada, the BRSM under the close patronage of the state, began establishing itself as the leading organisation in the youth sector domestically and abroad. Its efforts abroad included filing an application for membership with the European Youth Forum three times, along with several attempts to deprive Rada of its membership status.

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<sup>9</sup> Matskevich, Vladimir, 2012. *Obshestvennii dialog v Belarusi: ot narodovlastija k grazhdanskomy ychastiju*, Minsk: Logvinov I.P., p. 54.

As of now the BRSM participates in all state programmes for youth and educational policy, and enjoys considerable state support with Presidential decrees issued to formalise their position.

In 2003 the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organisations (BCYO) was created which, (along with the BRSM), was supposed to copy the activities of Rada and other organisations working in the youth sphere. Currently, BCYO consists of 39 youth and children's organisations, with the task of "improving relations between public organisations and the government". However, BCYO exists only on paper. It does not have a website, and available information about its activities is limited. The committee members do not know its structure nor its activities. They were only invited to the first congress. Some of them did not give consent to their membership.<sup>10</sup>

Another example of the existence of two sets of organisations is the Union of Writers. The democratic aspirations and intractability of its leadership deprived the organisation of property. The authorities initiated a split in the Union and supported the creation of a new Union of Writers of Belarus (UWB) in 2005, which was loyal to the state.<sup>11</sup> UWB was intended to fulfil the states needs in the artistic and literary sphere and enjoys considerable state support. The same is true with the Union of Polish minority, where two unions exist, one supported by the government and the other one in opposition.

Other cases include the Belarusian Journalist Association (pro-democratic) and its governmental counterparts – the Belarusian Union of Journalists, the Belarusian Union of Women (pro-government) and the Belarusian organisation of Working Women (pro-democratic), "Green Network" (pro-democratic) and the pro-government organisation "Ecological Initiative", as well as official and pro-democratic (i.e. independent) trade unions. These are some of the most well-known and commonly referred to examples, but the list is not exhaustive. The existence of such GONGOs creates an imitation of public dialogue in the country.

The support that GONGOs enjoy from the state often comes at the expense of real NGOs. This becomes evident, for example, during election campaigns when GONGOs play a leading role. The widespread practice of nominating electoral commission members and observers from such structures lends credence to this claim. As the report on the campaigns leading up to elections "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" from 2010 shows, the vast majority of domestic observers were representatives of pro-government associations and political parties loyal to the authorities:

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<sup>10</sup> *Alternatyunaja maladziouvaja platforma, Bielaruski Kamitet Moladziovykh Arhanizacyj – miortvaja struktura* <<http://ampby.org/2011/04/05/4385/>> [accessed 28 December 2013].

<sup>11</sup> Matskevich, Vladimir, 2012. *Obshestvennii dialog v Belarusi: ot narodovlastija k grazhdanskomy chastiju*, Minsk: Logvinov I.P., p. 46.

*The majority of observers (20,715 out of 39,619) represented the five largest GONGOs: Belaya Rus', the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the Belarusian Women's Union, the Belarusian Public Association of Veterans and the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus... their aim was to confront observers from pro-democratic organisations and journalists.<sup>12</sup>*

The BYCO, along with conducting election observations and providing nominees for election committees, holds opinion polls the results of which usually mirror official election results. Interestingly enough, only two Belarusian organisations were allowed to conduct exit polls during the latest Presidential elections (2010) – the BCYO and the analytical centre EcooM.

## **Structures Built to Imitate a Dialogue with Civil Society**

In addition to creating organisations which mirror the activity of non-governmental organisation, instances of civil society structures providing a facade of cooperation between the state and civil society also are known to occur.

In 2009, the Public Advisory Council (PAC) in the Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus was created with the objective to:

*... discuss issues of current importance on the development of the state and society, develop proposals for the active involvement of Belarus in global processes, improvement of the directions of socio-economic and political development of the country.<sup>13</sup>*

PAC was supposed to regularly meet and discuss issues that were then to be communicated to decision-makers. It was established by the initiative of Uladzimir Makei, The Head of the Presidential Administration. All of its representatives were personally selected by Makei, without any public discussion. The agenda was also formed mostly by the Head of the Presidential Administration.<sup>14</sup> The creation of the Council coincided with the announcement of the Eastern Partnership programme, where Belarusian civil society was to have a voice at an international level in the framework of the established Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership. In 2010 Uladzimir Makei expressed the readiness of the PAC of the Presidential Administration to represent Belarus at the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership. Interestingly enough, Makei expressed his intention to do precisely this and pursued it vigorously despite the fact that the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum had already been created. The selection

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<sup>12</sup> [http://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/2011/Final\\_HRD\\_Monitoring\\_report\\_on\\_presidentialelection\\_in\\_Belarus\\_ru.pdf](http://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/2011/Final_HRD_Monitoring_report_on_presidentialelection_in_Belarus_ru.pdf) > [visited on 28 DEC 2013].

<sup>13</sup> TUT.by, 2009a. *Obshchestvenno-konsultativnyi sovet pri Administratsii prezidenta provel pervoe zasedanie* <<http://news.tut.by/politics/128616.html>> [accessed 4 January 2013].

<sup>14</sup> Yaraslau Bekish, Interview #7, 2013.

procedure was done, the delegation members were selected, and as such PAC formally could not aspire to participate.

It was an attempt to control civil society not only “from inside” the country, but also from the outside, through its aspirations to represent civil society externally. The statement of PAC on its participation in the Civil Society Forum preceded the creation of civil society platforms in the framework of the OSCE project “Development of the capacities for cooperation between government and civil society organisations”. Yury Zahumienau and his organisation, the Support Centre for Associations and Foundations (SCAF) initiated the creation of twelve platforms (e.g. education, culture, human rights, social security and business). The completion of this process was set to be confirmed through the creation of a nationwide NGO platform under the patronage of PAC.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, pro-democratic NGOs had already created a nationwide NGO platform uniting various organisations in the framework of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (NP CSF). Thus, the structure proposed by Zahumienau could not be distinguished from the one already created. This had resembled an attempt to create a national platform of organisations to counterbalance the existing state line, with the only distinction between them being that it was composed of non-government controlled entities. The members of the NP CSF stated there are not “enough reasons to believe that the above [...] structures established in recent months are truly focused on an equal dialogue with civil society” (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2010). The process was also characterised by a “lack of publicity and transparent procedures on the side of the new platform organisers with regard to the selection of participants, [and] certain public statements do not correspond with real activities”.

All three processes (the creation of PAC, alternative platforms and aspirations to take part in the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership), confirmed the state’s attempt to replaced civil society structures with identical ones tailored to this aim. After this process raised public condemnation inside and outside the country, the structures were deactivated. PAC was dissolved in 2011, following a lack of meetings for over a year. The NP SCF in the Eastern Partnership continued without other organisations joining it.

Yury Zahimienau and his organisation SCAF is associated with yet another case involving GONGOs. This case involves the preparation of a report based on the CIVICUS index on civil society methodology that was done within the framework of a project supported by the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe. CIVICUS is an international alliance and represents an influential network of organisations at the local, national, regional and international levels, thus spanning a broad spectrum of civil society groups and organisations worldwide. The CIVICUS index is a valuable tool in helping to

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<sup>15</sup> Egorov, 2010a. *Politicheskaya situacija nakanune Vtorogo Foryma, Grazhdanskogo Obshchestva*. Centr evropeiskoi transformacii, November.

evaluate civil society in over 75 countries. Its findings are disseminated to country experts and stakeholders, who use it for assessing the situation in a country. The preparation of the stability index report on Belarus under the auspices of CIVICUS was coordinated by Zahumenau, though since its creation, several flaws have been identified in the process of its preparation.

First of all, it is not clear why the choice was made to use SCAF. The Belarusian public has rarely mentioned this organisation, nor does it appear to have much knowledge about it. The official website of the organisation looks modest and does not provide clear information about the organisation: No information could be found on the staff and concrete activities, some web pages are outdated referring to the fifteen year old news. It can be understood from the English version of the website that the scope of their activities range from facilitating the removal of anti-personnel mines to strengthening civil society. Secondly, during the course of the research project, the NGOs which participated in it withdrew from the process as the methodology used did not prove to be accurately designed for assessing the reality in Belarus. An analysis of what the appropriate methodology should have been was assessed by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and Centre for European Transformation. They concluded that the findings did not reflect the results from the measurements of the index.

## **Funding of GONGOs Through the Programmes Tailored for Support of NGOs**

Many international organisations working with the Belarusian regime do not operate openly. The information available about their activities is limited. This stems from the requirement to register international projects inside the country, which is the only legal way for international aid organisations to operate, irrespective of its purpose. In the same time certain donors deal with the state and its actors. Lukashenka publicly motivated BRYU to reach self-sufficiency and obtain financial resources from sources other than the state budget. As a result, BRYU stated their plans to receive European funds and has confirmed cooperation with such organisations as the Council of Europe, European Youth Forum, as well as various Youth Unions in Russia and the CIS.

On the other hand, some donors consciously grant money to pro-government organisations. The reason for this behaviour is an apparent attempt by donors to normalise relations with the Belarusian government and try different approaches towards cooperation.<sup>16</sup> The idea is that by cooperating with the government, and by at least partially playing by its rules, their work will bring future dividends and help influence the situation to the benefit of the people. One such example of foreign aid being allocated to pro-government organisations is the European Union Non-State Actors and Local Authorities

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<sup>16</sup> Anna Herasimava, Interview #4, 2013.

in Development (NSA LA) programme. The programme, introduced in 2007, is oriented towards strengthening capacity of civil society organisations and local authorities.

A new tendency has emerged with regards to the funding mechanism under this programme since 2013 – namely, the competition requirements have changed. Now there is a demand that all partners in the project must be registered. If the applicant acts as an international organisation, it must have at least one registered partner in Belarus. Yet now, since there are problems with registration, many of NGOs do not fit these requirements. It has become increasingly difficult for projects of “undesirable” organisations to be supported by the European Commission programme for non-state actors.

UN programmes have also reportedly shifted their focus from real NGOs to GONGOs. Thus, the decision-making of the Global Economic Fund is tied to the ministries, as some of the ministerial representatives are included in the Council. In this way these members of the Belarusian government give grants to GONGOs.<sup>17</sup> The Council of Europe supports GONGOs engaged in ecological activity, even allocating grants to an organisation which has existed for only one month. Despite this organisation being almost completely unknown, it received funding to the detriment of the pro-democratic alliance of ecological NGOs “Green Network”.<sup>18</sup> While more research is needed to investigate the cases mentioned, one can state the existence of a tendency on the part of international donors to support organisations considered to be GONGOs.

## **Conclusion**

The uncontested realm of politics in Belarus excludes civil society actors from taking part in the decision-making process. In this way the state monopolises politics and diminishes the space available for the presentation of alternative views. The conditions necessary for the formation of a robust civil society significantly deteriorate as freedom of expression and assembly remain under constant challenge. The shrinking space for NGOs to work legally is alarming. The difficulty and selective nature of registering an NGO, the criminalisation of the activities of unregistered organisations, the marginalisation of strong NGOs, fundraising obstacles and the creation of government controlled GONGOs have all diminish the legal space for the existence of alternative civil society organisations.

The conditions under which civil society must operate are shaped by a control-based approach of the state towards these organisations. Control manifests itself in the incorporation of civil society by the establishment of GONGOs, whose membership exceeds the membership of any pro-democratic NGOs. The number of GONGOs

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<sup>17</sup> Yaraslau Bekish, Interview #7, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Egorov, Interview #5, 2013.

operating in Belarus, organisations which often mirror or mimic the activity of existing NGOs, is growing.

The grounds for substitution exist. However, in the cases mentioned, such attempts were characterised by their essentially restrained nature. The third aspect analysed a mix of the states attempts at external and internal substitutions, which involved funding GONGOs for programmes that are tailored to support civil society and NGOs. A clear tendency of providing grants to GONGOs is outlined in this article. One can state that the formation of an environment conducive for the substitution of pro-democratic NGOs has been established.

Under the conditions of a repressive and consolidated authoritarian regime, reinforced by a weak civil society, substitution leads to distorted perceptions of civil society and NGOs. Existing sociological research shows that GONGOs are better known than authentic democratic NGOs. Apathy and a lack of interest in the activities of NGOs reinforce this argument. Coupled with the restrictive environment for the operation of civil society by the government, GONGOs are perceived as “authentic” NGOs. Appropriate grounds for a comprehensive understanding of the role of civil society and NGOs needs to be laid down. Authentic civil society organisations should continue to monitor substitution attempts and react quickly to these.

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