

Civil Society and Political Parties: Together While Apart

In November, civil society representatives convened in Minsk to vote on the Concept of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EAP CSF). The adopted version of the Concept favours an expansive interpretation of the civil society mission and was criticised by some groups as pushing civil society organisations on the road of political conflict with the Belarusian authorities.

Unnecessary politicisation of civil society activities was mentioned as the primary reason for the refusal to sign the Concept by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, human rights centre "Viasna", Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarus Helsinki Committee, Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, and others. How harmful politicisation harmful for the development of the Belarusian public sphere?

"Civil society" has become a buzzword among Western political leaders and analysts concerned about the future of Belarus. Glorified as the springs of democracy, civil society is sought after – by the EU policymakers, who would like to fund, meet, and consult civil society actors on every visit to authoritarian states. The authorities, in their turn, would like to control, eliminate, or coopt them.

This dynamic is forcing some uneasy choices on the civil society leaders in Belarus. One of these choices concerns the appropriate extent of political involvement. How close to politics can Belarusian civic leaders get without endangering subverting their mission, getting imprisoned, or losing trust of the Belarusian population?

Staying away from politics?

In the past, much of the Belarusian civil society tended to follow the lead of the Belarusian opposition. This has changed around 2006: with the political opposition suffering one defeat after another and lacking support in the Belarusian society, many NGOs began to take over the initiative and eschew dangerous association with the opposition. Civic groups learned independence and cultivated their own leadership. This was a propitious development at the time.

Moving away from politics saved many nascent groups from repression, improved the image of the civil society in the Belarusian public, and contributed to the emergence of new leaders in the Belarusian public sphere.

At first glance, continuing to stay away from politics also seems like a good idea today. After all, political parties still have little credibility with the public. According to the sociological monitoring by the pro-regime Institute of Sociology of the NAN of Belarus and non-regime agencies such as the Independent Institute for Social and Economic Studies only a tiny fraction of the population trusts political parties in Belarus.

Therefore, political involvement risks undermining the political neutrality of the civil society organisations and tarnishing the image. With politics generally considered dirty in Eastern Europe, association with the opposition may prevent civil society organisations from fulfilling their goals. This is a particularly great obstacle for organisations that have to work with the state, which includes professional associations, organisations defending human rights, or environmental groups.

Another potential problem from associating with political parties is breeding conflict among the civil society actors. While it is easy to agree on the need to prevent pollution or protect women's rights, it is a lot harder to converge on issues that involve collaborating with the authorities or

boycotting elections.

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This is why the Belarusian opposition has had trouble coalescing around common goals despite the enormous costs of disunity. In fact, the Belarusian civil society also has had its share of political conflict in the past, with the two feuding unions of Belarusian writers and two unions of Poles.

Avoiding such disagreement and contestation among civil society actors may be a difficult task in the context of an authoritarian state.

Building Synergy?

However, it has by now become clear that if a democratic transition is indeed to occur in Belarus, it will not come through the efforts of the civil society alone. While civil society actors may initiate change, it is the political parties that will help aggregate and represent societal interests when the change comes.

This is why there needs to be a healthy relationship between the civil society and political parties – with cooperation, but at a distance. The EU can contribute to this goal by supporting projects that promote the development of coalitions between NGOs, parties, and even state organisations.

To be sure, simply functioning in an authoritarian state automatically imparted a political hue on most civil society organisations in Belarus. In order to survive, some Belarusian NGOs resorted to financial support from the West. This support is motivated primarily by political goals, such as bringing about democracy or compensating for the inauspicious political climate in Belarus, – even as it is directed to groups distant from the Belarusian politics. Today, EU support needs to be

directed toward fostering collaboration between political and civil society actors.

The alternative – promotion of civil society at the expense of political parties – creates a dangerous imbalance by increasing the popular demand for change without strengthening the political actors who could deliver such change.

Whereas civil society groups help individuals discover and articulate their preferences, political parties alone are able to actualise these preferences in a nation-wide policy. Without the degree of synergy between political parties and the civil society, citizens will eventually become disillusioned with the political process and could be captured by populist leaders.

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Although the absence of linkage between the civil society and political parties hampers the ability of civic actors to shape politics, too much of a linkage undermines credibility and neutrality of the civil society. This is essentially a Catch-22 situation. Belarusian civil society needs to work with political parties to accomplish their goals, but these political connections are likely to undermine neutrality and unity of the civil society. We see today that the regime has succeeded in dividing the opposition, the civil society, and the Belarusian people thus fostering the impression of the impossibility of a democratic transition.

Is change possible in Belarus? History shows that opposition parties can win elections even in authoritarian states, but only if they collaborate with civil society groups and regional and transnational democracy activists and adopt bold and innovative electoral strategies, as argued by political scientists Valery Bunce and Sharon Wolchik.

Working alone or approaching elections passively has inevitably failed. Without collaboration, audacity, and unity, one cannot convince the people of the possibility of victory and, as a result, the people stay out of the streets and choose not to vote. Achieving unity among the civil society actors and the political opposition by creating connections between these two forces is therefore key to preparing the ground for a democratic transition in Belarus.