

Final Blow to Civil Society in Belarus?

Minsk is not taking chances in times of crisis. Only instead of heeding the advice of international economic experts, the Belarusian government is tightening the screws on civil society.

In this year of 80% inflation, the new laws in Belarus are penned almost as fast as the new rubles are printed. The latest three draft laws were (prudently) passed in a closed session of the parliament and appeared on the government website yesterday. The draft laws strengthen the KGB, outlaw protests, and prohibit foreign funding of civil society and political organizations.

Because the police and the KGB already effectively enjoy unlimited powers, the draft law simply endorses their long-standing practice of breaking into homes and organizations, sending the message to those who are still bold and incredulous. The draft prohibiting protests is also nothing more than a reminder that dissent is dangerous, even though the consequences of public protests, whatever their nature and legal justification, are already well known to most Belarusians.

It is the draft legislation that prohibits foreign assistance to political and civil-society groups and bars them from holding money in foreign banks that is likely to have the gravest repercussions of the three.

The blow to civil society comes in the midst of a global economic crisis, when the foreign aid inflows are contracting, and when Belarus itself is in a deep crisis, which undercuts the opportunities to secure resources domestically.

Ironically, this is the time when NGO services are all the more needed by the people who are plunging into poverty. Instead of enlisting civil society organizations to help solve the proliferating social and economic issues thus reducing the population's discontent, the government has clamped down on the public sector, aggravating the situation.

Depending on future economic developments, it may be shooting itself in the foot by removing all the brakes on social dissatisfaction. Of course, given the weakness of the NGO community and the focus of Western-funded NGOs on political and human rights issues rather than social services, this effect may be marginal.

Most likely, the laws will have the intended effect and further weaken civil society in Belarus. For the NGOs that have so far survived, it may deliver the final blow. Unfortunately, Belarusian civil society and political opposition are highly dependent on foreign donors. Even though the aid proved too small to bring change to Belarus, it was enough to irritate the government.

After the donor nations pledged 87 million euros (\$120 million) to Belarusian NGOs and opposition groups in February and after the European Commission promised in March to increase its funding to Belarusian civil society from the €4 million to €15.6 million in 2011-2013, the Belarusian government decided to act.

Of course, NGOs' dependence on foreign aid creates its own problems, but in the Belarusian case, it is a lesser of the two evils. The Belarusian NGOs have few other options in their struggle for survival. Few can secure domestic sources of funding because the domestic charity culture is nonexistent and the channels to entrepreneurship are obstructed by the government.

The draft falls neatly within many other documents aimed at

undermining civil society in Belarus. In 2004, the law on mandatory registration allowed the government to crack down on the most threatening NGOs selectively, spurring waves of arrests and fines of civic activists. In 2008, when Presidential Edict No. 533 abolished the NGO privilege of lower rents, this raised rents on property tenfold for some organizations that were now treated like commercial entities.

On Thursday, leaders of several Belarusian NGOs asked the government to withdraw the draft laws. The EU expressed concern. However, these voices are unlikely to be heeded and only prove that the laws will have the intended effect: after all, it is the NGOs and the EU funds that the Belarusian government targets. Minsk does not budge on far smaller issues: the international outrage and the embarrassment of the Polish and Lithuanian governments following the arrest of human rights activist Ales Byalatski did not mitigate his harsh punishment.

Crack down on civil society, ramp up the powers of the police, and outlaw dissent – these steps have always come before economic reforms on the agenda of the Belarusian government.