

FUTURE OF BELARUS

Panel: Civil Society: It's Role in Democratization

The Principal Task of Civil Society: To change the mindset of Citizens

Hans-Georg Wieck

May 2012

1. The challenges to civil society

Civil Society – that means a wide spectrum of civic activities, organized by non-state actors – plays a very important role in shaping public opinion on issues of public concern and interest. Independent Media and independent courts are indispensable partners for civil society. On the political level, open society translates the main perceptions of the citizens into the institutions of pluralistic democracy let it be a presidential or a parliamentary system. Civil Society is the backbone of what Karl Popper identified as “Open Society” in his important book, published in 1945 “The Open Society and its Enemies”. He disavows dictatorships and gives all the credits to structures of open societies to bring about social and political structures based on the respect for individual human rights. This is the philosophical answer to predetermination as taught by totalitarian systems such as communism and nationalism of the Hitler and Mussolini-type. May be, in the reality of our times, the perceptions of the European Union are the incarnation, may be a flawed one of this open society concept that includes errors and mistakes to be corrected in case of need as we experience now with the common European monetary system.

In war times and under the conditions of authoritarian regimes - such as Lukashenko-type of state structure and to a very large degree also the current Russian government system - governments seek to control politically key components of civil society: Political parties, trade unions, churches and enterprises are taken under rigid control, not to speak of academic as well as other educational institutions. Decisions of any kind are subordinated to the needs of discretionary and uncontrolled power of the authoritarian regime.

Such systems are bound to collapse, since the rest of the world moves on. That was the fate of the Soviet Union, of the GDR and of state run economy in China.

Civil society generates – by way of public dialogue - perceptions about the identity of the nation and its history and of course for it's positioning on the international stage. This takes place under the conditions of an open discourse and free and fair elections.

By claiming exclusive responsibility for these important issues any authoritarian regime deprives the nation not only of its right for self-determination but also the citizens of their human rights, their citizen rights.

Under such conditions, the international community, in particular the neighboring European Union and its member states defend internationally recognized political and human rights values. They have no choice but to establish working relations of their own with civil society in the country concerned – to the degree possible, without abandoning contacts with the authoritarian regime in the pursuit of democratic transformation as agreed upon in the Charter of Paris dated November 21, 1990.

I do recognize a fundamental change in attitudes toward Belarus within the European Union after December 10, 2010. Now, civil society is recognized as an important partner. The meaning of this change - beyond statements and conferences - needs to be discussed.

2. Deficiencies of public awareness in Belarus in the perception of the former socialist political and economic system and of socially rooted market economies as practiced within the European Union.

It appears to me that the public and certainly large parts of the nomenclature in post-Soviet countries perceive the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of the Soviet system at large as “an accident de route” caused by Michael Gorbachev, but not as an almost inevitable event due to fundamental deficiencies of the Socialist system as such.

However, in the late seventies in China and in the Soviet Union it was understood at the top level of these two countries that the so-called capitalist system is not going to collapse as the result of insurmountable contradictions within the capitalist system. As a consequence thereof it was understood that the socialist systems could not inherit as its prey the collapsing capitalist system. Consequently, the communist or better said the socialist system of state run economies had to adjust to the capitalist system that excelled in technological innovation and in the development of a socially rooted market economy with capital and labor as stake holders for economic success and benefits. In particular, key countries within the European Union excelled in this regard.

China chose to transform the economy of the country into a market economy with private ownership under the central political control on key issues of the communist party. The Soviet Union tried to achieve the transformation of the economy by abandoning the monopoly of the Communist party and failed to deliver. The leaders, whoever they were, of the fifteen member states of the

Soviet Union stepped into the power vacuum that was created by the dissolution of the communist control system. Neither democratic transformation nor socially rooted market economies were brought about in post-Soviet states. The Baltic States managed the transformation and are now members of the European and transatlantic structures.

In my judgment public opinion in Russia and Belarus fail to understand the fatal deficiencies of the Socialist economic system: The elimination of private initiative, private enterprise and public discourse (free media) as well as the loss of an independent judiciary system had transformed the Soviet Union into a state run economy depending on income from natural resources such as oil, gas, gold and other minerals with declining productivity, as Andropov already learned from his advisors. Next to the state planned and controlled economy there existed outside the legal system a grey economy that kept many households and factories going. Such an economic and political system can be kept alive only by rigid control, and suppression. It has to isolate itself from the rest of the world and faces catastrophe once the natural resources were depleted or the demand reduced substantially due to new technologies. This is what is happening now. On the other hand, there are no limits to technological innovation. In the end, we will live among others on the goods manufactured on the basis of recycled garbage.

Let me refer to the GDR: The territory that formed the GDR since 1949 had been the center of the high tech German industry until the end of WW II – notably Berlin, Saxony, Thuringia and Anhalt. In 1989, the GDR was near economic collapse – and the country was void of any internationally competitive industry. The GDR had eliminated private enterprise and tried to rely on large state run enterprise. It chased entrepreneurs and specialists into West Germany that absorbed between 1945 and 1948 around 12 million refugees and expelled

Germans and three million East Germans from 1949 until 1990. Under the conditions of socially rooted market economy with stakeholders “capital” “management” and “labor” the West German industry grew into the third largest economy on the global scale during the cold war.

3. Civil Society and Public Awareness of Key Issues for Belarus

The post-Soviet nomenclature rejects outside advice and support for civil society as an act of post-cold-war imperialism and as an attempt to impose Western models on Russia or Belarus for that matter. This is an unfounded criticism – – in my opinion. However, there are voices within our own society who share the criticism. They consider the post-Soviet space a legitimate area of Russian prevalence and the role of civil society as the avant-garde of industrial and societal innovation to be a false concept. They refer to China as a proof for their rational. They are wrong: China experiences a serious crisis within the communist leadership because of the emancipation of parts of private enterprise from the rules of the game controlled by the Central bodies of the Communist party.

Why do I introduce this issue into our debate: Because I think that it falls upon civil society of Belarus to shape public opinion in the country – based on convincing studies – about the fatal deficiencies of the socialist system and to study also seriously the ethical foundations of socially rooted market economies – such as developed within the European Union. We have such debates on our own soil. After all, the GDR existed for forty years and tried hard to establish a productive socialist system. However, as a former senior official of the East German KGB confessed in these days: ”We - the GDR - could exist only as long as the Soviet Union supported us – not a single day longer”. That is a surprising confession and verdict at the same time. I add, and even Soviet support did not

suffice. The FRG supported the GDR financially in the interest of human relations, as was argued.

The people in Belarus are uncertain so far as the European option is concerned, because until now they have failed to understand that - except for a rent system based on oil and gas revenues – there is no future for a planned state economy- in a global market of highly competitive national or regional economies.

On April 20, a round table discussion took place in Minsk on the theme of “European Dialogue on Modernization in Belarus – Challenges and Prospects” – It was organized within the framework of the National Platform of Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform. A few days later, Stefan Fule, the EU Commissioner in charge of Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy, explained in an interview with Radio Free Europe the principles guiding sanctions against the regime’s core elements and the growing and deepening cooperation of the European Commission with Civil Society in Belarus.

That policy needs to be made a success. However such success can be achieved only – in my opinion - if within Belarusian society an open dialogue takes place on the fundamental deficiencies of planned, state economy and on the merits of a socially rooted market economy. In Belarus, planned state economy is pursued mainly for the sake of securing presidential control and of avoiding Russian takeover. The latter cannot be prevented if Belarus continues to be run by deficits and Russian subventions. That is a very bleak outlook and should encourage civil society to actively engage public opinion into a dialogue on the core issues of the country’s future.

In this light of this assessment of the mental state of large parts of civil society we should strengthen our efforts to more deeply familiarize society with the underlying issues of socio-economic developments in socialist state run economies on the one hand and socio-economic foundations of liberal societies and their socially rooted market economies:

(1) We would need at the European Humanities University in Vilnius for instance a “Chair for Transformation in East Europa”

(2) We would need – compiled at appropriate organizations - a list of successful Belarusian industrialists and entrepreneurs outside of Belarus, providing evidence for successful economic activities of Belarusians under international market conditions.

(3) We would need in some key countries “Belarus Academies” – charged with the task of initiating conferences on and studies of key issues of the development of Belarus in the past, at this juncture and possible avenues into the future. Such Academies would bring together Belarusian and foreign knowledge on issues under consideration.

Berlin, May 2012