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# ***A Few Words About Belarusian Civil Society Today***

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*"Belarus is not about fate, not about destiny, but about choice... When and where is Belarus?"*

*Where two Belarusians gather in the name of Belarus, that's where Belarus is"*  
From the *Litradio* podcast with Heinrich Kirchbaum<sup>i</sup>

My reflections on the specifics, essence and possibility of existence of Belarusian civil society today were prompted by recent discussions with those deeply involved in the development of Belarusian civil society and Belarusian education reforms. A conversation with Heinrich Kirchbaum (a guest on the *Litradio* podcast about Belarus, Belarusian studies and Belarusianists, as well as author of the book *Belarusian Brykhalazhii*) – as well as revisiting my old article “Formation of Civic Literacy as a Task of Modern Mass Education”<sup>iii</sup> – also helped shape questions about the specifics that characterize the Belarusian situation, how Belarusian civil society is defined today, and what needs to be done to strengthen the potential of people in Belarus to participate in the development of any civic activity.

At first glance, the question might seem naive: what is Belarusian civil society today? This question, when asked out loud, sometimes causes bewilderment among the participants of various discussions: are there really those who do not know what civil society is? Civil society can be defined as:

- the public sector as a sphere of voluntary activity carried out by citizens, not directly related to the state or business;
- the cooperation of free people voluntarily acting for the benefit of society, while at the same time influencing state institutions, by forming traditional instruments of influence – i.e., non-commercially oriented associations and organizations.

In addition, school textbooks tell us that within civil society in the modern world “there is a ‘layer’ between citizens and the state, which prevents the latter from concentrating all power in its own hands and establishing a dictatorship on the territory of the country”<sup>iv</sup>.

Reading such a definition, it becomes clear that in the traditional sense, “a country” is a synonym of “a state”. The blending of these terms makes the phrase “civil society within Belarus” seemingly acceptable, as has been expressed in some of the discussions between activists in the Belarusian diaspora. But is this so? If the state is foremost a political concept that describes the way certain mechanisms and apparatuses for governing society are organized (i.e., political power operating on a territory limited by state borders), then a country is somewhat different.

On the one hand, a country is a historical and a geographical concept, for which territorial reference, natural conditions and resources are important (so important that, unfortunately, they can sometimes cause wars). On the other hand, it is more of a cultural and historical concept, uniting people and structures with common identities, languages and cultures. And in this sense, the concept of “the territory of a country” takes on a slightly different meaning than can be captured by the boundaries of its geographical shape on the map. This is especially true with today’s technology, which helps cultural and historical communities of people quickly and easily overcome geographical boundaries while preserving their identities and interactions regardless of their specific location on the world map. The uniqueness of the Belarusian situation today is characterized precisely by this distinction, which very clearly distinguishes the very different meanings of the concepts of “the Belarusian state” and “the country of Belarus”.

It is hard to disagree with Kirchbaum that **Belarus today is the responsible choice of free people** who are able to unite their efforts and act within specific cultural and historical conditions, influencing the development of not only the Belarusian situation, but also the humanitarian situation as a whole. An important contribution to this process of taking action can be made through the development of Belarusian discourse with regards to *the conceptualization of ideas and situations* through the transformation of the meanings of concepts and bringing them into line with the changing situation. This involves refining concepts that comprehensively represent the Belarusian situation as a unique case through descriptions of:

- *our country* – as a network of people, organizations and structures, all jointly acting to strengthen the development potential of everything Belarusian and Belarus – people who share the values of peace, diversity and inclusiveness; striving for change; understanding and preserving their uniqueness while strengthening interactions with “the other”; expanding the space of “the Belarusian”; and creating sustainable institutions of influence;
- *Belarusian civil society* – as a developing network and educational community, expanding its influence on “the Belarusian” and Belarusians, regardless of their specific location and the duration of their stay there;
- *Belarusians* – as people and communities who are aware of and preserve their uniqueness; independent, reliable and professional partners who, together with others, show concern for the world in which we live and are capable of interacting to reach a depth of understanding and action.

In this renewed Belarusian discourse, of course, a special place is occupied by the *idea of the Belarusian civic nation*, which helps to unite people both *there* (within the country) and *here* (in interaction with the participants of numerous Belarusian communities that have become active in different countries), to find a common language and overcome existing gaps together, and to determine what unites us and demonstrates our Belarusianness, thereby contributing to its secure integration on an equal footing into modern processes of general civilizational development.

That is why the question “*What is Belarusian civil society today?*” is so important. By searching for an answer and rethinking its key concepts, we will be able to find the essence of a consolidated civil society, protected from direct interference and arbitrary regulation by the state authorities of Belarus.

The development of a consolidated Belarusian discourse is an important mechanism that allows us to build up assets and new practices to help us resolve our long-standing problems, such as:

- value, ethical and aesthetic gaps with the modern world and culture, as well as between ourselves;

- paternalistic attitudes and isolation, mainly driven by our own interests;
- self-created ghettoization, accompanied by the reproduction of familiar behavioral patterns, alongside claims and expectations that someone else “should” always extend a helping hand (and ideally, help solve our own problems for us).

Unfortunately, sometimes in our urge to be independent, we, much like teenagers, focus only on cultivating the familiar and that which is already known to us, not particularly showing a desire to doubt our own knowledge and independently learn something different. And this is a serious problem.

I see many people that are involved today in building democratic processes and taking on serious tasks who do not doubt the “truth” of the conviction – absorbed so easily by our post-Soviet mentality – that “democracy is the power of the majority”. They do so without realizing the how their actions relate to the principles of “democratic centralism”<sup>v</sup> that in the USSR defined the boundaries of the admissibility of “public” influence and activism, all the while boasting that “We have not studied your political sciences”.

I also see other participants in our civil society who take on the development of promising reforms in various areas of activity and are guided by the desire to help a specific category of Belarusians, but they do so based on the study of translated materials describing someone else’s experience, representing fundamentally and uniquely different methodologies and conditions (those of another country and political system) that led to its development. They tend to leave the actual methodology and the context behind, as they persistently assert that this is the only way one can and should act in our conditions today (commenting: “We know little about management”). There is absolutely no shame in admitting one’s lack of competence and preparation. But it is dangerous not to take competency into account, while persistently offering proposals without questioning and challenging their foundations and consequences.

A person’s right to express their position and to be heard is an undoubted advantage of democracy. But how can we help Belarusians quickly recognize and accept its key

principles – respect and recognition of the institutional rights of minorities, as well as the separation of powers? How can we bring these principles into our own lives and the lives of our organizations and communities? What can help us with this is understanding the factors *that influence the awareness of people's actions*, making them develop judgments and make civic choices in the first place, including adequate assessments of the political and economic situation.

**A person's civic choice is a manifestation of their civic position:** it comprises our personal philosophy, coupled with our subjective awareness of ourselves “as an independent unit in social relations, which determines the understanding of our place and purpose in society, readiness for responsible action in the surrounding world, [and our] need for self-realization of our capabilities”<sup>vi</sup>.

*The formation of a person's civic position is shaped by the inclusion of civic and civic-legal literacy in their life – this is the self-developed ability<sup>vii</sup> to participate in a democratic community: to think critically, to act deliberately in conditions of pluralism, and to show empathy, which allows them to hear and thereby help others<sup>viii</sup>. Knowledge that forms civic and civic-legal literacy cannot be simply conveyed to a person by means of straightforward informing or retelling (including showing and training). It requires a person to immerse themselves in the world of civic-legal knowledge.*

*The world of civic-legal knowledge is the world of building relationships between a person and their own self, with the people around them, and among various communities and groups of people. The language of this world is the language of communication: understanding, conflict and compromise. Mastering such a language is impossible without directly acquiring communication experience: living through an interaction situation and assuming responsibility for its results<sup>ix</sup>. That is why the development of communication practices among members of the Belarusian civil society is one of the most important conditions for strengthening its potential.*

For communication to emerge, several conditions must be present: a common subject of communication; bearers of at least two opinion positions and their mutual desire to interact with each other; and space for the coordination of norms and meanings among them<sup>x</sup>. For civil society, the development and support of the communicative practices of its participants is the most important resource for implementing one of its key functions – stimulating the socially useful activities of citizens and uniting them in the interests of protecting their rights, property and personal dignity. In the context of a network organization and the engagement of current and future participants in the Belarusian civil society, an effective tool for “growing” their civic literacy and position may be the **emergence of various self-help groups** and **peer support groups**.

A virtual and real association of people who meet in person and are interested in specific support and the resolution of vital-for-them problems (for example, improving their health, organizing their daily lives, etc.) allows them not only to quickly find help from those who have experienced a similar issue and acquired relevant experience, but also to jointly contact specialists, learn to advocate for their interests, and find the partners needed to create the necessary conditions and resources for the resolution of their problems. Involvement in communication gives participants in self-help groups the opportunity to experience freedom and responsibility, the presence or absence of rights, presenting their positions, as well as learning understanding and acceptance of the norms of interaction.

Today, supporting the processes of forming self-help and peer-support groups in local communities and diasporas can become a priority task to ensure we lay important foundations for the future sustainability of the Belarusian civil society. Under the modern conditions of life in democratic Belarus, we need to keep finding areas of intersection of interests, learn to discuss and competently resolve our problems, strengthen the potential and civic position of developing communities, and expand the boundaries of influence of the Belarusian civil society on the processes of the democratic development of Belarus.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Podcast «Our brykalazh. “Near the Literature” with Heinrich Kirshbaum»: [https://litradio.link/podcasts/kalia-kirschbaum/?fbclid=IwY2xjawF5391leHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHT2vzqKrc\\_QfFHIXYjs24bqut\\_MSYPX\\_qGy16cQuck-Dsw2xvx4j-sdlag\\_aem\\_fsBKke0FRQv8VmwbNCU7HQ](https://litradio.link/podcasts/kalia-kirschbaum/?fbclid=IwY2xjawF5391leHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHT2vzqKrc_QfFHIXYjs24bqut_MSYPX_qGy16cQuck-Dsw2xvx4j-sdlag_aem_fsBKke0FRQv8VmwbNCU7HQ)
- <sup>ii</sup> Kirschbaum, H. Belarusian brykalazh / trans. from German by Yaraslava Ananka. – Prague: Viasna, 2023. [Kirschbaum, Heinrich. Revolution der Geduld. Eine belarussische Bricolage, – Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2022]
- <sup>iii</sup> Savelava, S. B. Development of Civic Literacy as a Task of Modern Mass Education / S. B. Savelava // Masterstvo. – 2000. – No. 1/2. – p. 27-33.
- <sup>iv</sup> Civil Society // Textbook MAXIMUM Education: Social Science, 9th grade: <https://maximumtest.ru/uchebnik/9-klass/obshchestvoznaniye/grazhdanskoye-obshchestvo>
- <sup>v</sup> Democratic Centralism // Philosophical Encyclopedia. In 5 volumes. – Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia. Edited by F. V. Konstantinov. 1960-1970. [https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc\\_philosophy/4271/%D0%94%D0%95%D0%9C%D0%9E%D0%9A%D0%A0%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%98%D0%A7%D0%95%D0%A1%D0%9A%D0%98%D0%99](https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc_philosophy/4271/%D0%94%D0%95%D0%9C%D0%9E%D0%9A%D0%A0%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%98%D0%A7%D0%95%D0%A1%D0%9A%D0%98%D0%99)
- <sup>vi</sup> Matskevich, V. V. Problems of Education in the 21st Century. / Problems of Education and Qualification of Teachers. Abstracts of Reports for International Conference. – Minsk, 1989. – v.1. – p. 8.
- <sup>vii</sup> Here, “ability” is understood as “readiness to act in certain situations; a defined potential paired with the necessary knowledge and personal resources to meet that potential”.
- <sup>viii</sup> Barber B. An Aristocracy of Everyone. NY, 1992.
- <sup>ix</sup> Savelava, S. B. Development of civic literacy as a task of modern mass education / S. B. Savelava // Masterstvo. - 2000. - No. 1/2. - pp. 27-33.
- <sup>x</sup> Babaitsev, A. Y. Communication // Sociology: Encyclopedia. Edited by A.A. Gritsanov, V.L. Abuschenko [and others] – Minsk, 2003: [https://sociology\\_encyclopedia.academic.ru/477/%D0%9A%D0%9E%D0%9C%D0%9C%D0%A3%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%9A%D0%90%D0%A6%D0%98%D0%AF](https://sociology_encyclopedia.academic.ru/477/%D0%9A%D0%9E%D0%9C%D0%9C%D0%A3%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%9A%D0%90%D0%A6%D0%98%D0%AF)

