



Project Report
Assessing Democracy
Assistance

Assessing Democracy Assistance:

Belarus¹

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This report is FRIDE's contribution to a project entitled 'Assessing Democracy Assistance' that is being carried out by the World Movement for Democracy. The project aims to gather views on how democracy support can be improved and its impact enhanced. Other case studies and a synthesis report can be found at www.fride.org.

Presidential decree No 8/2001 which is headed 'Several Measures on Improving Distribution and Use of Foreign Humanitarian Aid' in effect prohibits foreign donations to NGOs that are involved in any activities of a political nature. This decree states that foreign aid must be formally registered with the authorities; however registration has proven to be impossible for any project that might challenge the regime. Thus the activities of donors, international implementers and local actors engaged in democracy assistance are effectively illegal in Belarus.

As a result, the information given in this case study is limited. The study looks at the provision of assistance to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media outlets in Belarus. It aims to provide the maximum possible information on democracy assistance impact in Belarus without prejudicing the security and wellbeing of local actors. Naturally too, donors and local actors themselves are also often reluctant to provide specific details on support provided and received.

The Republic of Belarus became an independent country in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the framework of a parliamentary democracy was established in the early 1990s, Belarus was unable to build a free society. Instead the process of democratic transition was suspended in the mid-1990s and the country reverted to authoritarian rule. The main factor in this process was the establishment of the office of president in 1994, and the subsequent election of Aleksandr Lukashenka to the post.

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Lukashenka significantly enhanced presidential powers and constructed an authoritarian political system. The division of power between legislative, executive and judiciary was effectively abolished. Furthermore, the independent responsibilities of local authorities were eliminated, the constitution was re-written, and a number of nation-wide referendums were held which effectively put the entire state system under the control of one man and his inner cabinet.

Lukashenka did not belong to the high-level Soviet governing nomenklatura, but instead successfully ran against the incumbent Prime Minister who was backed by the 'administrative resources' of the government at the time. His popular election was one of the very few cases in the former Soviet Union where an incumbent former party member was defeated by an outsider. Ironically, Lukashenka then went on to dismantle the existing political system, which included a relatively free media, and the independence of the very parliamentary committees which had allowed him to gain popularity in the first place.

Lukashenka exploited the nostalgia many Belarusians felt for the Soviet Union over a long period of time, although in reality he was busy building a new system of power, one which is different, both institutionally and functionally, from the Soviet model. Importantly, the Lukashenka regime has shown a peculiar attitude towards nationalism. While at the beginning of his rule he focused on integration with Russia, with its cultural ties to Belarus, this discourse subsequently gave way to a nationalism far from typical of post Soviet regimes: one less based on ethnic factors than 'the interests of the state' as defined by the authorities and the president.

Many distinctive aspects of the regime, especially Lukashenka's pragmatism, his highly communicative personal style, and his popular support have been misunderstood (to varying degrees) by the international community from the start. In a similar way, the international media and research organisations have a tendency to paint a generally negative picture of 'Europe's last dictatorship'. According to 'Freedom in the World', a report by Freedom House, Belarus ceased to be a fully free country in 1996. Since 2005, its political rights index reading is 7 and its civil rights index reading is 6. It is also worth noting that official government policy, however undemocratically imposed, is often supported by the general population.

In the 1990s, international organisations regarded Belarus as a typical post-Soviet transition country. As a result, the focus was predominantly on its relatively good starting position for transition to democracy, especially compared with other post-Soviet states. The positive features identified in Belarus included a population with a relatively high level of education, an absence of armed conflicts, a developed industrial economy and undisputed national borders.

Scant attention was paid, however, to the specific situation in the country where Soviet propaganda, the impact of world wars and Soviet purges of the Belarusian intelligentsia all contributed to a weak national identity. This meant that any appeal by political parties to a nationalist discourse had significantly less success in Belarus than elsewhere in the region. The failure to understand the detail of the inner dynamics of Belarus meant the slide into authoritarianism, and the subsequent popular support for the regime and its grip on power, took many by surprise. Moreover, the eyes of the outside world were fixed elsewhere in the region, with Belarus effectively overshadowed.

Regardless of the authoritarian reality on the ground, NGOs do exist in Belarus and some are even fairly active. Furthermore, democracy development programmes are being implemented, in spite of the legal uncertainty that surrounds their activities.

Although elections in Belarus cannot be considered free and fair, Lukashenka is careful to maintain his support base through policies aimed at meeting the perceived aspirations of the population: minimum disturbance in exchange for economic growth and a certain standard of living. Indeed some talk of a 'social contract' whereby this is guaranteed in return for restrictions on political freedoms. Others argue that propaganda from the authorities shapes the 'perceived aspirations' of the population in the first place. However, with Belarus affected by the global economic crisis, the authorities are pragmatically modifying their policies to ensure the basic needs of the population are met and Lukashenka's position in power is ensured. A certain transformation is currently underway in Belarus which makes this case study particularly relevant. Following

Russia's decision in 2006 to end its policy of subsidising the regime with cheap oil and gas, Belarus has taken steps to move closer to the EU. This provides the international community with a potentially unique opportunity to observe democratisation in progress.

The benchmarks for the democratisation process were set out in a European Commission non-paper from November 2006 entitled 'What the European Union could bring to Belarus' which put forward 12 conditions the Belarusian authorities had to fulfil 'to end the self-imposed isolation which the Belarusian government has brought upon the country and its citizens.' These consist of democratic elections, freedom of the media, and respect for civil society; the release of all political prisoners and investigation or review of cases of disappeared persons; the establishment of an independent and impartial judicial system; the end of arbitrary arrests and detentions, respect for entrepreneurs' and workers' rights, and the abolishment of the death penalty; and, finally, cooperation with international organisations.²

In the late 1990s, programmes for democracy development lavishly funded projects for the organisational development of NGOs, the establishment of resource centres, the development of civic education, local self-government and the formation of political coalitions between democratic parties. A basic issue like obtaining premises for organisations to work from was considered a secondary aspect of a purely technical, logistical nature. Yet looking back, we can see that civil society organisations have survived in some shape or form only in those cities which created stable infrastructure where NGOs were able to develop. This mainly took the form of the acquisition of property, something which granted the NGOs in question vital independence from landlords who are easily subject to pressure from the state.

Engagement and pressure from abroad is what local actors identify as the single most important factor in increasing the impact of democracy assistance. The low popularity, lukewarm support and generally enervated state of civil society organisations in Belarus is accounted for by the same factors which dictate the wider political atmosphere according to those working on the ground in the country.

It is this general climate that led the government to liquidate the majority of NGOs between 2004 and 2006 through court decisions which stripped them of the official status they need to function. Particularly virulent repression took place when state institutions were preparing for the referendum in October 2004 which abolished limits on the term of presidential rule, and on the eve of presidential elections in March 2006. Regardless of this situation, NGOs do continue to exist and are fairly active in Belarus. Furthermore, even democracy development programmes are still being implemented (in spite of their questionable legal status). At the same time, activists for NGOs that have remained active despite being unregistered have been working under the threat of criminal prosecution as stipulated by Article 193-1 of the criminal code (criminal responsibility for activities on behalf of an unregistered organisation).

The independent media has also been marginalised through state repression, with media outlets prevented from working as normal businesses as well as frustrated in carrying out their role of informing the public. They are forced to operate in survival mode, at a minimum capacity, and with little space to grow and develop. Only the online media has escaped state restrictions, for the time being at least. The part of the programme regarding work with online media can be considered successful in the sense that the media outlets in question have been able to develop quickly and reach a high level of professionalism. The popularity they enjoy has grown as more people have gained access to the internet. However, only some Belarusian citizens have access to alternative sources of information through the internet, so online media outlets have limited influence as Belarusians primarily receive information from television, radio and state newspapers. Internet remains at present a secondary choice for those actively seeking information, with few government services or businesses accessed online.

Although a small number of NGOs were registered in late 2008 and 2009, most local actors report that it remains impossible to register an NGO whose members are known for political activism. Registration in these cases becomes an interminable bureaucratic process. When registration applications are turned down, activists tend to keep a lower profile and this prevents them from exerting an influence on mainstream society. Another hurdle is the need for an NGO to have a legal address, which must be located in an office

² European Commission, Non-paper 'What the European Union could bring to Belarus', undated, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/belarus/intro/non_paper_1106.pdf

building to have legal effect. To do this, NGOs see themselves forced to pay prohibitively high monthly rents (with prices set by state regulators), currently around EUR 6–10 per square metre.

NGOs are also subject to regular vilification in propaganda campaigns through the state media, which seek to portray them as ‘fifth columnists’ operating in the interests of foreign powers. NGOs themselves do little to counter this impression, and could do more to fight back by providing services, know-how and an alternative point of view to wider society. However, it is true that many of the leading civic activists are also leading opposition figures. Oppression from the authorities also impacts on NGOs as it reinforces their tendency to work primarily with other activists, within their own environment, rather than reaching out to the public at large.

The eastern regions of Belarus (Vitebsk, Mogilev, Gomel Oblasts) would seem to offer a more promising environment for NGO activities, as less pressure is exerted by the state authorities in that part of the country in comparison to the west. Since the 2006 presidential elections, the number of activist from unregistered NGOs prosecuted under Article 193-1 has dropped in these regions. Other kinds of pressure on NGOs such as searches or seizure of literature are also uncommon.

In western regions (Grodno and Brest), the pressure exerted by authorities on NGOs remains constant. NGOs in these areas were more developed in the early 1990s, and local activists there believe the area police chief has special orders to maintain the level of oppression. The result is that the level of development, at least in the view of local activists, has shifted in favour of stronger civic structures in the east where there are more favourable conditions.

State pressure and donor policies have too great a focus on NGOs directly linked to the opposition, meaning that the number of real, vibrant NGOs and independent media outlets in Belarus remains very low. However, for a small number of NGOs focussing on issues which the government considers important, there would appear to be more room for manoeuvre than was the case in the past, though there seems little chance of a “third way” in Belarus.

As the next presidential election approaches, more pressure is expected from the authorities. Indeed this has been a tendency in the past, with authorities temporarily loosening their grip on civil society and the media before a new wave of repression descends on Belarusian society. Recent small improvements should therefore not be considered indicative of a general trend, especially since none of the structural reforms required for profound change have been introduced. The Belarusian authorities appear willing to take the steps demanded by the international community in exchange for aid to ease the impact of the global economic crisis. But current positive trends are only likely to continue if the necessary assurances are provided by Lukashenka and his inner circle.

Overview of donor activities

Since Belarus’ independence in 1991, donors have provided democracy and development assistance to the country. However, the nature of that assistance changed following the notorious referendum in 1996 which introduced a strong presidential system and marked the beginning of the iron-fist rule of Alexander Lukashenka.

Following the protests in the aftermath of the 1996 referendum, international NGOs faced harassment by the authorities. In particular, the Belarus Soros Foundation (the most visible and influential NGO at the time) was forced to suspend its activities in 1997 after its director was expelled from the country. The Belarus Soros Foundation was the subject of a presidential decree which abolished its tax free status, and it was fined a large sum for alleged currency exchange violations. Furthermore, its bank account was frozen. Subsequently, all other foreign NGOs (mostly funded by the US government) were forced to close down their branches in Belarus.

International donors providing democracy assistance remain mostly unwelcome in Belarus. Only a few international organisations operating a small number of social development projects such as the UNDP or IOM remain in the country on a legal basis. The European Commission has been present since 1998, initially through its Tacis Branch Office, but its assistance has been restricted due to internal requirements to ensure project registration with the authorities for the vast majority of its projects.

The compulsory registration procedure which sees local NGOs obliged to register all financial assistance received at the Department of Humanitarian Activities can in practice only be successfully negotiated if the projects in question address national state priorities, such as social services provision for the most vulnerable groups. The procedure remains highly problematic for organisations campaigning for democracy, human rights, or providing civic education. On the other hand, the so-called GONGOs (government-operated non-governmental organisations) continue to receive state funding, though this has recently been slashed due to the financial crisis. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the number of direct lines of communication between independent NGOs and policy makers is growing due to the participation of NGOs in state-created public advisory councils as well as increased contacts at the local level.

Many donors and implementers continue to work from outside Belarus, something which influences the relationship with recipients as they are forced to travel abroad to meet up; it also means that development strategies must be written outside of the country. In addition, it limits the possibilities for monitoring and evaluation, and so could be said to impede the impact of democracy assistance.

The main donors that provide support for democratic development in Belarus are undoubtedly US public and private foundations. This is largely owing to one of the consequences of the international isolation of Belarus at the assistance level, not to mention EU countries barely noticing Belarus until EU enlargement in 2004 when it became a new EU neighbour.

Even though European assistance for Belarus has increased in recent years (with assistance coming from the European Commission, Sweden's SIDA, Denmark's MFA, Poland, Norway, the UK, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary), US government funded projects are the most significant both in terms of the amount of finance on offer and the quality of their impact.

The view of donors from Belarusian civil society representatives is revealing here. The latter laconically state that 'it is impossible to provide a sound review of activities by donor organisations taken from data obtained during the interviews'. Regional and local civic leaders and activists in particular appeared reluctant to offer an objective view of donors, or simply do not know enough about available donor support. The lack of information is due to the need donors feel to protect data and local partners. However, it also limits donors' work in the area of democratisation, and as a result, it is taken for granted that cases exist of the same projects being supported by more than one organisation. In short, resources are wasted due to the reluctance of donors to share relevant information with each other in a bid to 'protect' partners.

The situation is such that local organisations rarely look for additional, alternative partners or stakeholders. When they do so, they often run into difficulties as prospective partners are afraid to cooperate with organisations that oppose the authorities. Instead, there is a tendency to rely on established donors, something donors mirror in their dealings with local partners. In addition, it is always a natural temptation to keep those who pay happy, rather than focusing on targets and the people you are trying to serve. This has often led to the same civil society activists and the same donors working together year after year, with some arguing that this scenario stifles the emergence of new organisations and ideas, limiting the overall impact of democracy assistance. Others argue that at least the well-established organisations have a track record of more or less successful implementation, and that withdrawing support for them might lead to a reduction in the capacity of the few NGOs that remain.

Local views of democracy assistance

Some civic activists, NGO representatives and grant recipients interviewed have a number of concerns about the way democracy assistance is provided by donor organisations and implementing organisations. The points they raised are detailed below; common donor responses are also included to ensure a balanced picture.

Local actors complain that the resources provided are insufficient; donors, on the other hand, consider that there is an insufficient absorption capacity amongst local NGOs and media outlets.

Local stakeholders also say that there is a lack of understanding amongst donors regarding the nature of the documentation they are able to provide given the situation in Belarus, a problem compounded by constant changes in personnel in donor organisations. For example, local actors complain that original documentation is demanded, but carrying such documents outside the country is a risk for NGO activists. Donors, in contrast, are often concerned about the lack of transparency on the side of local NGOs. In particular, NGOs are often unable (and sometimes unwilling) to include the financial paperwork that donors require (for example, as local companies do not always issue receipts) especially in provincial areas. For donors, however, these requirements must be met; but few donors see such complaints as unwillingness on the part of NGOs, given that some local activists consider the grants as 'lifelines in the fight against dictatorship' rather than as funding for professional development.

NGOs complain that only rarely do donors support long-term projects as opposed to short-term (6 month) ones. Donors argue that only a few NGOs have sufficient capacity to receive institutional funding. Furthermore, most of the donor grant programmes are designed to support short-term projects.

In some cases, donors and implementing organisations provide grants exclusively to officially registered NGOs. Donors have recognised this problem, and many are increasingly showing themselves to be flexible in this regard. At the same time, specialised programmes exist helping NGOs to register in Belarus or abroad. Civic activists complain that donor organisations do not share their understanding of what needs to be done in Belarus and complain that good projects often receive no support. Donors meanwhile consider that local NGOs often fail to draft clear proposals, show a lack of understanding of how application procedures work, or fail fully to grasp the intentions of donors.

NGOs complain that donor organisations often require applications for grants to be made in English, and in addition ask that successful bidders provide follow-up documentation including reports in English too. Donors argue that if an NGO is going to demand a large institutional grant, it should meet certain basic requirements. It should also be noted in this regard that more regionally oriented grant schemes now accept documentation in Russian or Belarusian than was the case in the past.

Some local respondents think donors should be more aware of communication security issues, while some donors also judge NGOs' communication security to be low. Lately donors are funding special programmes helping to improve the security literacy of NGOs and the independent media.

Some civic activists argue that donors are not transparent enough when it comes to providing information about their programmes. According to donors, NGOs are unwilling to take into account donors' strategic objectives and are guided by their own agenda as often as not. Yet, paradoxically, these NGOs often wait for donors to take the lead and inform them on the area for which support will be forthcoming before they develop their project proposals.

In a few cases, donors require projects to be co-funded by the recipient organisation, which is very difficult in Belarus as it is almost impossible to secure any significant financial support from within the country. Still, the argument continues that NGOs need to find some support from their own constituencies, even if this support is not always of a financial nature.

NGOs also complain that donors often make funding decisions later than expected which can put them in an awkward position as their circumstances may have changed in the intervening period. This issue has been tackled to some extent by increasing donor coordination in the past few years; good examples of donors coordinating are mentioned mainly in relation to the independent media.

NGOs complain that, in a few cases, donor organisations published reports on their activities on the internet, including details of financial assistance. This information was subsequently used to discredit NGOs in the state mass media, by the KGB or tax authorities. Some donors believe that NGOs should find a way to legalise their activities as much as they can and so be able to take their place in wider society, which allow them to increase impact.

Civic activists note that donors sometimes provide support for false projects or award grants to 'fake' organisations controlled by officials of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), or subsidiaries of Russian nationalist organisations (such as Russian National Unity, or the RNE) or even KGB agents. Donors recognise that monitoring and evaluation is indeed a weak point of donor relations, though some argue that this is an unavoidable hazard which comes with working in a difficult environment.

Notwithstanding the above, local activists and leaders rated donor organisation activities as satisfactory, acknowledging that without the support of international donors, civil society would be much weaker than it is today.

Donor views of democracy assistance

Donors also had a number of opinions about local actors, which included the following points below. There is a tendency amongst NGOs to prepare grant applications poorly; such applications are often put together without including an exact description of the problem they propose to solve. Instead, NGO applications for grants often appear to seek donor support for their own long term activities. On the other hand, it was recognised that quite a few public sector activists work with target groups very effectively indeed, implementing projects in a very efficient manner, while still encountering real difficulties in drafting quality applications.

There were cases when NGOs did not implement the project for which they had submitted an application and obtained funding. Either the individuals concerned carried out other activities with the grant, or they simply pretended to carry out project-related activities. This is more frequent in newly-created NGOs who do not fear for their own reputation as much as older ones do. Some believe this is also true for NGOs which are closely linked to political activists or parties and are thus focused on the political fight rather than on actually implementing the project for which they have received funding.

Competition between local NGOs for donor support has led to certain local organisations orchestrating smear campaigns against each other. A typical tactic is to accuse rivals of being in the pay of the KGB. This is something that could be addressed by systematic monitoring and evaluation by donors.

Donor coordination is noteworthy for taking place frequently, but unfortunately the same cannot be said for the quality of coordination. A regular coordination process exists between the EU and the US, and there are periodic meetings of US implementers and media donors. The Belarus International Implementers' meeting focuses on civil society as well as the political process. However, despite frequent meetings, donor strategies remain rather disparate, especially when it comes to tactics.

The unwritten rule has long been to support those parts of civil society and the media opposed to the Lukashenka regime. This is still the policy of many US implementers and donors, while the EU, for its part, has never sought to support politically active civil society. Recently, donors have shifted the focus from somewhat exclusive, direct and partisan human rights support, to getting behind democracy development in a more diverse and plural way. This comes at a time when the EU (and to a lesser extent the US) has been trying to engage with the Belarusian government. Importantly, more frequent attempts to engage local actors in strategy development in all possible sections of society is taking place, something which could signal a new phase in democracy assistance in Belarus.

Local views on the impact of democracy assistance

Local respondents noted the importance of consistent and strategic support for democratic development in Belarus. They also pointed out that a number of cultural and social conditions on the ground are prerequisite for the successful establishment of democracy, such as a tradition of political participation and a sense of national identity and culture. These factors are a basic minimum requirement for the formation of reasonably solid democratic infrastructure (including NGOs and civil society structures, well-developed political parties and free universities).

Civil society activists and independent journalists risk state persecution as a direct consequence of implementing projects not recognised by the Belarusian authorities. ‘Don’t forget our contribution to democracy development programmes includes risking criminal prosecution and imprisonment’, one respondent noted. In this respect at least, the drastic differences in attitudes to certain aspects of project implementation between foreign donors and NGOs are easy enough to explain; work is an ordinary administrative process for donors, while for NGOs on the ground, it comes with serious risks attached.

In terms of donor support, local respondents distinguished two positive ‘models’ which they encouraged donors to develop more fully. First of all, they argued that support should be provided to help local communities to resolve some specific and relatively simple problems. These could include matters such as water supply issues, providing repairs to improve the quality of residential areas, regional development of one form or another, as well as building playgrounds for children and organising leisure activities for young people. Secondly, they felt that activities related to Belarusian culture, history and language should be supported. Local activists believe that such ‘non-political’ projects make it possible to increase NGO awareness in local communities, making them more popular. This would help attract new members and contribute to building a positive image of NGOs, providing useful services to the community at the same time. However, sometimes such organisations complained that they were viewed by the recipients of such support as government employees working on behalf of the administration.

Donors emphasised projects in wider civil society which aim to engage and empower the population in activities related to its rights, opening the eyes of the people to another reality than the one imposed by the state.

Projects which take care to take into account the situation on the ground, make partners responsible and accountable, and focus on very concrete results are the most productive. Setting out with the aim of fighting for democracy is not enough.

Focusing on central authorities in terms of democratisation is considered as the most important factor by many respondents. For example, in Belarus, the presidential executive power needs to be democratised first, while the rest of the government institutions might come later. This way of thinking reveals that many civil society activists and independent journalists view democracy assistance as a tool for ‘fighting against the dictatorship’, and only to a lesser extent as a means for developing the country.

Positive assessments of democracy assistance

The existence of international democracy development programmes is considered vital in order to preserve the organisations, opinions, and traditions prerequisite for future progress towards democracy in Belarus. Regardless of the fact that Belarus continues to be an authoritarian state, openings do exist in the country to carry out activities which further the cause of democracy. To a large extent, this has been made possible by a number of donors putting the right strategies in place consistently over time, helping to create a flexible infrastructure for democratic society (both legal and quasi-legal).

Work carried out with the online media can largely be considered a success, with media outlets developing quickly and offering a high level of professionalism. The popularity of these outlets has grown as more people have gained access to the internet. Partners are generally very grateful for the expertise, training and

technical support provided by donors. Simply keeping media outlets alive has often been a kind of success in itself, something in large part due to projects geared towards enabling the switch from print to online information, thereby increasing circulation, creating and strengthening independent systems of distribution. In those cases where the authorities have threatened to shut down media outlets, the backing of democracy programmes has again played an important role, and this support has been very much appreciated by partners.

Respondents gave positive assessments of those democracy support programmes that are aimed at the creation of a long-term, stable basis for democracy. Projects of a cultural nature that promote the development of Belarusian national identity were particularly highlighted. Respondents believe that such programmes are effective as the authoritarian Belarusian authorities do not see any direct threat in them. The impact of these programmes is undisputed, though the knock-on effect on democratic change seems somewhat remote.

Nevertheless, activists were critical of what they called 'the lack of clarity of vision' on the donor side, and urged greater distinction between different types of assistance and support of democratic processes. Local respondents mentioned 'methodology, material and technical support (equipment), direct financial assistance, development of partnerships with foreign NGOs and exchange of experiences with them [and] expert assistance' as important forms of democracy assistance.

An increased readiness from donors to respond to the requirements of local actors and listen to experts within the country was pointed to as a positive trend. Donors have started to take those features specific to Belarus into account and develop a consolidated and aligned strategy.

Respondents assessed very highly those donor activities that support democratic development through grassroots initiatives. They noted in this regard that donor strategies are predictable, show a reasonable combination of flexibility and consistency, and respect the opinion of national experts.

The perception of the nature of proposed projects by the authorities can be a major factor in the success of the project. At the time when the Belarusian authorities were silencing opposition voices, it was obvious that any projects by organisations like the Soros Foundation would be regarded as a threat to national security, and implementation would be prevented one way or another. Yet it might be equally possible for the same project to be implemented by a previously unknown organisation. For example, one of our respondents noted that the organisation of a project about patients' rights at state-run hospitals, which was supported by a donor on the KGB blacklist, was impossible. At the same time, exactly the same project submitted under the aegis of the Red Cross organisation from a foreign city, encountered no obstacles and was green-lit by the state authorities.

The biggest failings of democracy assistance

On the whole, respondents gave a very low impact estimate to those democracy programmes geared towards building traditional democratic institutions based on the Western model. They noted that this approach is not effective given the incumbent authoritarian regime in Belarus. Support among regional and local activists for primary, non-institutional measures which create the conditions for democracy in Belarus is regarded as more pertinent than institutional support at present. This might contradict other views lamenting that only around 25–30 of the country's 118 regions have active independent NGOs. Other parts of the country are blank spots on the map, where only state-controlled organisations exist (such as DOSAAF – Voluntary Association for Assistance to Army, Air Force and Navy, or the war veterans' organisations), or those based on hobbies and personal interests (collectors' groups, for example).

In addition, donors – though not local respondents – refer to 'democratic ghettos', a phenomenon whereby democracy assistance programmes merely end up targeting the very same people who are already opposed to the status quo. There is a 'political and/or moral support' debate among donors and implementers, with some of the latter suggesting that moral support for recipient organisations has led to civil society and the independent media being excessively or even exclusively donor-orientated, as opposed to result-led. The

“ghetto”, however, was driven by demand as politicized projects were almost exclusively solicited for years by both civil society and the donor community. The fact that pro-democracy groups have lost relevance in mainstream society can be viewed as a result of the “combined efforts” of the government, civil society and the donor community.

A large number of active NGOs are not officially registered with the state. Some continue to work underground under pressure from the authorities, while others limit themselves to areas where they are likely to find some degree of tolerance; others still simply cease to exist altogether. This is a burning issue for local activists, who continue to lobby the international community to put pressure on the Belarusian authorities to repeal Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code. This criminalises acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation, stipulates registration requirements for NGOs and regulates the distribution of the ‘independent’ press through a system of state monopoly (Soyuzpechat) as opposed to the free press which NGOs demand.

It has been noted that, regardless of the institutional differences between the Belarusian autocracy and the Soviet model, the legacy of the Soviet totalitarian regime continues to make itself felt on political culture across the country, especially at the level of elite values. Based on responses from activists, it would seem that democracy support programmes developed for classical transition cases from authoritarianism to democracy are less effective where the transition process has been reversed back from democracy to totalitarianism.

The strategic failures of the democracy support programmes in Belarus in the 1990s and early 2000s were also noted. Those programmes focused on achieving immediate results; they failed, without leaving anything positive behind. The failure by donors to pay attention to detail at the time (when assistance rules were more lax) and lay down some kind of civil society groundwork, including a lack of proper investment in facilities and premises, was mentioned as one failure.

The matter of premises is a very real problem in a number of regions where there is simply no space for civic activists and NGOs to interact. The problem becomes more acute in winter when civic activities grind to a halt in many regions for the same reason. International donors should consider purchasing property for NGOs, or even investing in repair work of activists’ own property. Good examples are the Mogilev and Vitebsk regions, where the availability of premises with the legal status of private dwellings has helped facilitate civic action, but also avoids squandering funds on rented premises. NGOs in Grodno spend around USD 700–800 a month on rent for small premises which do not even allow for larger meetings. Given that this is a long term issue, it must ultimately be successfully addressed to avoid failure in basic democracy assistance.

Respondents observed that donors frequently support GONGOs without proper consideration of the real nature of these public unions and associations with effective links to the state, something characteristic of post-totalitarian authoritarian society. The state is often represented by institutes that would be independent in the West. These organisations include many ‘NGOs’, trade union organisations, local self-government bodies, some economic organisations and even the bodies responsible for housing and public amenities. Donors have sometimes fostered NGOs aimed exclusively at implementing their own ideas, thus fostering dependency, as opposed to building partnerships at the grass roots level, which would boost democratic development and aid wider civil society.

Another complaint was that some donors are too quick to demand ‘success stories’. This often leads to the wrong programmes being prioritised, with those projects that look effective taking precedence over those which are more efficacious but also more low-profile. This is especially prone to happen when the attempt is made to implement successful experiences from other countries in Belarus; unfortunately, one policy is not always easily transferrable to another context.

Neither technical assistance from the EU, nor that offered by the UNDP, was judged by respondents to produce any kind of significant impact on democratic development in Belarus. This response comes with the caveat that most respondents have limited – if any – awareness of programmes aiming to support registered (official) civic organisations.

Respondents were also very critical about what they called ‘donor fashions’. Very often, attention to some problem or other begins to dominate the global agenda, and activities in Belarus are tailored in response to the passing trend of the day, regardless of the particular relevance to the situation of Belarus. One recent example of this was attention to a long term EU global issue through the EIDHR programme, namely children’s rights. However, it was also noted that sometimes the opposite mistake is made, and year after year donors continue to finance activities which have never proved to be effective at all.

Civic activists gave a particularly negative assessment to donor activities aimed at directly coordinating the political arena (support to coalitions of political parties, their participation in elections and other political campaigns). This criticism goes back to the 2001 elections and coalition building efforts, such as between political parties and civil society structures, which for some donors is still the primary focus of democracy assistance. Others argue that only by acting together can the combined opposition hope to bring about change, and that such efforts did bear fruit in the 2005–2006 period where democratic forces were able to re-group around a single candidate for the 2006 presidential elections.

The recipients noted that pressure from state authorities means NGOs are unable to reach out to the main cross-section of society and exert a wider influence. NGOs’ audiences today are narrow segments of local communities. In cities where NGOs are active, only around one tenth of residents are aware that the NGOs even exist, while a much lower number of inhabitants take part in NGO events. Many are afraid to contact NGOs, or simply consider them as part of the opposition political parties given the nature of their activities.

Views on diplomatic back-up to aid programmes

Practically all respondents noted the importance of political support from the international community for the development of democracy. According to local views, the financing of democratic development programmes makes no sense without direct foreign policy support for these processes through communication and negotiation with the government, and in certain cases, through direct political pressure and sanctions.

Public activities aimed at including Belarusian issues in the pan-European agenda are considered very important. In this respect, political will from the international community is seen as indispensable. Some donors, though not local respondents in the regions, highlighted the work of the Office for Democratic Belarus in Brussels, a unique body in the region which seeks to shape EU policies toward Belarus through voicing the concerns of civil society and making suggestions directly in Brussels.

The divergence of information, though not necessarily viewpoints, between local and international respondents suggests a lack of awareness amongst local actors regarding ongoing diplomatic work. Donors, in particular, highlighted the pressure brought to bear on Belarus not to reverse the registered status of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, as well as pressure to accept the registration of EU projects, amongst other things. The steps taken by the Belarus International Implementers Group (BIIM) to inform the international community, especially the EU, about the actual developments on the ground related to the 12 points from the European Commission’s 2006 non-paper were also highlighted. Other international respondents mentioned political support for direct political party building (from the US), for example the support of the unification process which led to the selection of a single candidate from opposition political parties and civil society for the 2006 presidential election. Most local and international respondents continue to view the EU as apolitical in its support of civil society.

International respondents were rather critical of using conditionality in development assistance programmes, if only because it is widely considered to have failed in Belarus. For example, the European Commission suspended further support programmes when projects were refused registration. However, that scenario suited the Belarus government perfectly well indeed. Engagement also proved to be difficult without a permanent EC presence. After the opening of the EC Delegation, international respondents highlighted the lack of resources (both human and financial) committed to this presence. Collective European engagement

has also been compromised by differing bilateral agendas of EU member states such as Lithuania, Poland, Germany and Slovakia.

Diplomatic support is viewed positively in those cases where local implementers or actors were jailed for their activities, as international pressure brought to bear on the government seems to have contributed to their release.

Factors influencing the impact of democracy assistance

For the most part, people in Belarus are not aware of democracy assistance programmes. The majority of these programmes are implemented covertly due to the illegal nature of the activities they entail. As a result, the only source of information for the average person about such programmes is propaganda from the state-run media, which links any support for democracy with opposition political parties, or even with organised groups attempting to carry out an unconstitutional seizure of power. As a result, the low levels of awareness of democracy support programmes results in negative attitudes to those programmes.

On the other hand, the segment of the population with access to unbiased information about democracy development programmes (members of NGOs, members of political parties, students, urban residents, internet users) generally regard such programmes in a positive light. In the regions where NGOs are active, representatives of local communities who engage in events run by NGOs regard their activities as useful and important for society. The existence of truthful or balanced information usually results in a positive attitude towards democracy support programmes.

According to opinion polls, citizen awareness of NGOs is extremely low. One of the serious obstacles to the circulation of information about NGO activities is the state-imposed ban on publication of information about NGOs and the events they hold, in the state and non-state media. The regular efforts made by NGOs to inform through the distribution of booklets, leaflets and brochures is not enough in itself to break through the state information blackout. One reason for this is that many of these alternative means of informing (for example, fly-posting, distributing leaflets) are suppressed by the state authorities, while the distribution capacity of NGOs is limited and they lack the logistical capacity to reach significant numbers of the population. Importantly, there are few if any projects which support alternative distribution efforts, mainly due to a lack of local effort in this area. Last but not least, NGOs often cannot afford to hire creative professional and marketing consultants to design and run campaigns to compete with the state.

However, the lack of recent effectiveness in NGO communication and information distribution is as much connected to the campaign by the state authorities to discredit their activities as any other factor. NGO leaders rarely recognise that the public may not identify their acts as civic rather than the activities of the opposition. NGOs also have a tendency to disregard anything that is not connected with opposition thinking and does not contribute to changing the views of the general public in terms of the regime. This situation limits the ability of NGOs to communicate with wider society.

In the eastern regions of Belarus, where the authorities generally have been more tolerant, public organisations work closely together, coordinating their activities and implementing projects jointly. This situation has benefitted from the availability of premises where public organisations can come together in places like Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev and Bobruisk to considerable extent. There are buildings with large halls where people can congregate and where joint events can be held (though the buildings in Orsha and Bobruisk require serious repair work). This is partly due to the efforts of committed and forward-looking activists who took initiatives to build community centres or secret hideouts when people in other regions were waiting for donor funds to obtain premises.

In the Grodno and Brest regions, by way of contrast, the authorities exert a tighter grip and activities by public organisations have a more fragmented, makeshift nature, with activists working more in isolation and conducting far fewer joint activities. There are real problems in terms of available premises where NGO offices can be registered and where meetings can take place.

In general, the impact of democracy support programmes at the micro-level was considered by respondents

to be very strong and positive. Impact at the meso-level was considered not very effective and not always in a positive light. Impact at the macro-level was seen as largely insignificant, though currently growing (with donors demonstrating new, more effective approaches); but it was judged too early to make evaluations. Those projects at the central level trying to boost local NGO capacity and focus are limited to a few sectors such as the Green Alliance (environment) or the Budzma! campaign for education and language).

Respondents expressed various ideas when assessing the amount of assistance, and its relation to needs in the long-term. Current levels of financial assistance were considered sufficient, and no shortage of funds exists at present. However, the common perception is that the sums provided are distributed in an uneven manner. Some projects widely seen as highly unlikely to bring about any kind of real change in Belarus enjoy generous financing because of their uncontroversial nature. These projects will meet with little or no state resistance as a result, which in turn increases the chances of 'successful project implementation' and the right box being ticked off on somebody's list. At the same time, creative, innovative, unconventional approaches tend to encounter difficulties in raising finance; there are few foundations or organisations prepared to support unconventional approaches.

In the longer-term, present funding levels might well prove to be insufficient. National fund-raising skills have not been developed, and there is widespread reluctance in society at large to offer any kind of support for fear of being targeted by state authorities in the shape of things such as tax inspection. Should some kind of political modernisation and liberalisation take place in the country, a serious shortage of funds would most likely soon make itself felt. The fear of local actors that any democratisation process runs the risk of giving way to backsliding by the authorities is another possibility to guard against.

The respondents believe there is a case for long- and short-term support, with some kind of flexibility in the ratio between each, as both kinds of support are important and donors are required for each kind of assistance. However, at the same time, donor policy must be consistent and the information which goes with it, clearly expressed.

Conclusion

With the Belarusian government deciding that democracy assistance in Belarus is effectively illegal, both local actors and international donors are forced to find the right balance between sharing information about their activities, and ensuring the security of project participants. Oppressive governmental measures include constant pressure, scare campaigns, and stirring up conflict between democracy activists, thus limiting citizens' access to objective information, effectively leaving the internet as the only free space in society. State propaganda portraying any non-state alternative as actions carried out by self-serving individuals paid for by the 'evil West' only adds to this.

The central government has taken a leading role in curtailing civil society and forcing the independent media to exist on permanent life-support. Democracy assistance is therefore firmly under government control. For example, in the past few years, donors have invested heavily in the media. While independent online sources are of superior quality to the state-controlled media, they currently have very limited influence on the overall situation in Belarus, as the population continues to receive information almost exclusively from the latter.

Democracy assistance is viewed positively overall by civic activists, bearing in mind the strict conditions under which it exists; however it is criticised for its lack of impact. As this survey suggests, a lack of information has fuelled misunderstanding between donors and local actors and limited the impact of democracy assistance. However, it has been possible to continue to assist civil society and the independent media in some shape or form, in what from a donors' perspective are 'extreme' conditions. This survey does not discount the possibility that the Government of Belarus is quietly happy with this situation, as it serves to provide ammunition in their campaign to discredit opposition voices.

Maximum pressure through diplomatic channels is considered key by most donors to changing the prevailing conditions in Belarus, though the impact of lobbying has been reduced by the absence of a united front vis-à-vis Belarus, even within the EU itself. Locals especially emphasised that any increased democracy assistance support is unlikely to radically alter civil society and allow it to go beyond mere survival mode unless the authorities further ease restrictions, especially with regard to Article 193-1 of the criminal code.

There is a growing acknowledgement amongst local actors and donors that democracy assistance programmes have been backing the same people for a long period of time without enough progress. Though this group constitutes the hard-core opposition of the Lukashenka regime, it has in effect created a parallel opposition community instead of addressing and convincing Belarus mainstream society of the need for change. Donors have also played their part in creating this situation, offering the kind of support that has made civil society and independent media donor-dependent instead of result-orientated. Both donors and local actors recognise the need to increase support to NGOs with less political focus now and in the future, with the aim of increasing the level of engagement with ordinary people. However, it is also recognised that this will result in fewer resources being directed to assisting political parties.

Given the current environment of dialogue between Belarus and the West, the door is potentially open for more democracy assistance. Keeping donor policies flexible and diverse in terms of programming and planning, increasing monitoring and evaluation to improve the quality of programmes, increasing common donor planning as well as adjusting strategies by listening to locals, could all help transform democracy assistance in Belarus from the current 'business as usual' status, to a success story in the not too distant future.

Appendix: Country Report Methodology

Scope and aims of this report

This report assesses external democracy assistance in one country according to the views of local democracy stakeholders.

The report does not aspire to provide an exhaustive record of external democracy assistance to the country in question. Neither does it aspire to be a representative survey among local civil society at large. The scope of this project allows reports to provide only a rough sketch of external democracy assistance to the country assessed, and of the tendencies of local civil society activists' views on the latter.

Sample of interviews

The report's findings are based on a set of personal interviews that were carried out by the author between spring and autumn 2009.

For each country report, between 40 and 60 in-country interviews were carried out. The mix of interviewees aimed to include, on the one hand, the most important international donors (governmental and non-governmental, from a wide range of geographic origins), and on the other hand, a broad sample of local democracy stakeholders that included human rights defenders, democracy activists, journalists, lawyers, political party representatives, women's rights activists, union leaders and other stakeholders substantially engaged in the promotion of democratic values and practices in their country. Wherever possible, the sample of interviewees included representatives from both urban and rural communities and a selection of stakeholders from a broad range of sectors. While governmental stakeholders were included in many of the samples, the focus was on non-governmental actors. Both actual and potential recipients of external democracy support were interviewed.

Donors

The term 'donor' is here understood as including governmental and non-governmental external actors providing financial and/or technical assistance in the fields of democracy, human rights, governance and related fields. Among all the donors active in the country, authors approached those governmental and non-governmental donors with the strongest presence in this sector, or which were referred to by recipients as particularly relevant actors in this regard. An exhaustive audit of all the donors active in this field/country is not aspired to as this exceeds the scope of this study. While many donors were very open and collaborative in granting interviews and providing and confirming information, others did not reply to our request or were not available for an interview within the timeframe of this study. While we sought to reconfirm all major factual affirmations on donor activities with the donors in question, not all donors responded to our request.

We do not work to a narrow or rigid definition of 'democracy support', but rather reflect donors', foundations' and recipients' own views of what counts and does not count as democracy assistance. The fact that this is contentious is part of the issues discussed in each report.

Anonymity

External democracy assistance to local activists is a delicate matter in all the countries assessed under this project. It is part of the nature of external democracy assistance that local non-governmental recipients, especially when openly opposed to the ruling establishment, fear for their reputation and safety when providing information on external assistance received to any outlet that will make these remarks public. In a similar vein, many donor representatives critical of their own or other donors' programmes will fear personal consequences when these critical attitudes are made public on a personal basis. In the interest of gathering a maximum of useful information from our interviewees and safeguarding their privacy and, indeed, security, we have ensured that all interviewees who requested to remain anonymous on a personal and/or institutional basis have done so.

Interview methodology

In order to carry out field work, authors were provided with a detailed research template that specified 7 areas of focus:

1. A brief historical background and the state of democracy in the country;
2. A short overview of donor activities;
3. A general overview of local views on impact of democracy aid projects on the micro, meso and macro levels (including best practices and variations of the local and international understandings of the concept of 'democracy');
4. Local views on specific factors that have weakened the impact of democracy aid;
5. Local views on diplomatic back-up to aid programmes (including conditionality; diplomatic engagement; donor coordination; relevance, quality, quantity and implementation of programmes, etc);
6. An illustration of the above dynamics in one or two key sectors of support;
7. A conclusion outlining the main tendencies of local views on external democracy assistance.

Along these lines, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were carried out by the authors in the country between spring and autumn of 2009.

Key sectors of support

Transitions to democracy are highly complex political, economic and social processes. No study of this scope could aspire to fully justice to them, or to external assistance to these processes. Aware of the limitations of our approach, we have encouraged authors to let their general assessment of local views on external democracy support be followed by a closer, slightly more detailed assessment of the dynamics in one or two key sectors of support. These were chosen by the respective authors according to their estimated relevance (positively or negatively) in the current democracy assistance panorama. In none of the cases does the choice of the illustrative key sectors suggest that there may not be other sectors that are equally important.