

Solidarity test: reaction of Belarusian civil society to events in Ukraine in 2013–2014

Civil society in post-Communist countries is often viewed as the main actor for democratic changes; this view is usually combined with a lack of trust in institutional policy potential. Conservation of political life in Belarus, combined with the lack of any significant moves towards democratisation in the last twenty years, puts even more hope on civil society as one of the surviving environments of positive activities. We hope that this collection of articles that sum up the achievements of Belarusian non-governmental organisations in the last 15 years, will be used as an argument in discussions about the significance of civil society for the post-Communist transformation.

In addition to asking ourselves what has been done, we would like to pose another question: “Is it possible to do anything?” We do not want to repeat old mantras about the Soviet mentality, lack of social capital, political barriers and a multi-level dependence of Belarus on Russia in order to prove the limitations for the development of civil society in Belarus. Our interest lies in the internal condition of civil society. Does it have a potential for united and consolidation action?

Unlike other texts, this one will search for answers to this question via analysing recent political events rather than long-term trends. Hidden capabilities are best revealed in the moment of crises; a situation that demands rapid reaction becomes a litmus test for the presence of certain qualities allowing the quick re-formatting of actions.

Naturally, one of the necessary characteristics for joint collective action is solidarity. One should note that a wide research of Belarusian civil society took place in 2014, the main goal of which was to measure the potential of solidarity, and ability to act jointly in the name of common interests and objectives.¹ Conclusions in that research were quite pessimistic. Belarusian civil society is divided across several lines, has different strategies

¹ *Tsentr evropeiskoi transformatsii, Belorusskii institut strategicheskikh issledovani. Issledovanie potentsiala solidarnosti v belorusskom organizovannom grazhdanskom obshchestve. // Study on potential of solidarity in the organised Belarusian civil society. 2014. URL: http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014_Solidarity_NGOs_Belarus.pdf.*

and cannot agree on basic values; therefore, one cannot hope for solidarity or plan to mobilise the existing potential of civic activists.

The approach taken by us is different. We analyse the solidarity potential not via learning the values and opinions of subject of civil society (usually collected by questionnaires) but via analysing a case study (event and reactions to it) of solidarity in the situation where one could not stay indifferent.

Things that bring sorrow and grief to people can bring happiness to a researcher. Recent events in Ukraine have drastically changed the focus of social and humanistic sciences. The world (or at least our part of it) has changed. Ukraine became the focus that changes the tone of any conversation, forces us to re-evaluate things, to view ourselves critically, and ask difficult and painful questions. At the same time, this situation allows us to unravel hidden and not evident information about ourselves and the outside world, which would stay hidden in a stable “ivory tower” situation.

Let us analyse how the reaction to events in Ukraine uncovered the ability of civil society in Belarus to act in critical situations.

By the explicitly neutral definition “events in Ukraine” we mean a series of events that can be split into two main cycles: 1) Euromaidan (21 November 2013–February 2014) – mass protest actions, first of all in Kiev, that as a result brought regime change in Ukraine; and 2) the crisis of the territorial legitimacy of the Ukrainian state that demonstrated itself in the annexation of Crimea by Russia (March 2014) and growth of the separatist mood that resulted in the creation of the pseudo-states: Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. Stimulated by Russia separatism led to the bloody war, which is far from finished at the moment of writing this article (January–February 2015). These events were closely followed in the media and were well known to any indifferent reader. Therefore, there is no sense in describing them in detail.

However, the “solidarity test” mentioned in the headline deserves a special mention. Why, with whom and how should Belarusian civil society show its solidarity?

The division of the Ukrainian crisis into two interrelated, but different in nature cycles, defines two types of attitude to Ukrainian events:

- 1) Euromaidan used slogans of democratic values, European integration of Ukraine, fight corruption – these slogans were common to the programme statements of Belarusian civil society as well.
- 2) The annexation by Russia of part of Ukraine’s territory created a dangerous precedent for international law violation; support of separatist movements led to fully-fledged military action in the territory of the neighbouring states. These threats to international order and a violation of norms of intergovernmental relationships in the proximity of Belarus demanded and demand a reaction from the Belarusian side.

One should also take into account that Belarusian and Ukrainian civil society representatives have an extensive experience of cooperation, exchanges and contacts. For instance, many Belarusian activists participated in the first Maidan protests in 2004. Obviously, the crisis in Ukraine had to cause some reaction in Belarus. The first expectation was that in that situation the ability of Belarusian civil society to show solidarity, both external and internal, would present itself. In other words, Belarusians were expected to show solidarity to close ones who got into trouble and united themselves for consolidated action. In this research, we are interested mostly in the “external” solidarity: the public and collective action of Belarusian civil society supporting Euromaidan and the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

We would like to underline that the public and collective nature of this action is key to this analysis, since these factors should be the defining ones for civil society as such. Without public sphere and ability to form associations, there is no civil society. Therefore, we were interested in the way the European choice of Ukraine was supported in the public sphere. The nature and degree of visibility of such support can demonstrate opportunities for collective action for Belarusian civil society as such.

General context

Understanding the general context of the civic and political situation in Belarus is important for this analysis. This context defines the structural opportunities for the realisation of action. Naturally, conditions in which freedom and the possibilities for civic and political activities are heavily limited, impose certain limits on the various forms of activities as well.² Naturally, with Belarusian conditions, it is quite difficult to perform collective actions that would directly contradict state policy. However, if there is no confrontation, that creates totally different structural conditions that allow them to act publicly and legally. Therefore, let’s see first how the Belarusian government and, in particular, Alyaksandar Lukashenka reacted to events in Ukraine since his reactions are defining for the whole system of Belarusian politics.

Belarusian authorities that are mainly concentrated on personal succession and overall stability, are wary of political protests and revolutions in Ukraine that have brought success, at least in changing the government. This is a symbolic threat for the authorities in Belarus. The government of Belarus was especially worried about the Orange revolution in 2004 when the victorious spirit of the “colour” revolution was in the air.

However, in 2014, the reaction of Lukashenka to the protests in Ukraine was drastically different. This change in attitude can be explained by the changed configuration of the relationship between the Ukrainian and Belarusian political elites. Back in 2004, after

² See details on indices of sustainability of civil society.

the victory of the Orange revolution, Lukashenka managed to establish friendly relations with the then-president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, despite their ideological contradictions. At the same time, the relationship between Lukashenka and the next president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, was not that good. The best evidence of that are Lukashenka's words in 2011 about the "lousiness" of the Ukrainian ruling elite.³ Therefore, despite the restrained and guarded reaction of Belarusian authorities to Euromaidan, they did not offer Yanukovich any support, even a formal one. The meeting of Alyaksandr Lukashenka with the interim President, Oleksandr Turchynov on 29 March 2014, was a confirmation of that policy. As soon as a new government was formed in Kiev, even before it was considered by Moscow to be a legitimate one, the officials in Minsk declared their willingness to cooperate. Belarusian authorities also accepted as legitimate the results of the election of the new president of Ukraine. Lukashenka was present at the inauguration of Petro Poroshenko on 5 June 2014.

The issues of the territorial integrity of Ukraine became an issue of principle for Belarusian-Ukrainian relations at the highest level. The Invasion of Russian troops into the territory of Ukraine and Russia's active role in the destabilization of the situation in a neighbouring country, have changed the balance of power in the region. Lukashenka, even before the active phase of the conflict (on 23 February 2014) openly stated that the territorial integrity of Ukraine was in Belarus's interests. He confirmed that position several times. At the same time, the symbolic support for its Southern neighbour went side by side with traditional rhetoric about the brotherhood of Russian and Belarusian peoples, and about the necessity to come up with a joint position of both Russia and Belarus on the situation in Ukraine etc.

Belarus keeps strong ties with Russia via several institutionalised union agreements. One can see a reflection of those ties in the public rhetoric of Belarusian authorities that is based on the following principles: ambivalence, ambiguity, contradiction, avoiding concrete and irreversible steps. An example of this approach can be seen in the infamous interview of Alyaksandar Lukashenka on 23 March 2014, after which Ukraine recalled its Ambassador from Belarus. Being pushed by journalists, Lukashenka formulated his position in the following way:

Ukraine should stay united, undivided and integral, but de facto Crimea is part of Russia today.

³ On dynamics of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations in 2010–13 see: Maksak G. *Istoriya dvukhstoronnikh otnoshenii Ukrainy i Respubliki Belarus' 1991–2013 gg. // History of bilateral relations of Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus in 1991–2013 // Sotrudnichestvo Respubliki Belarus' i Ukrainy v novykh geopoliticheskikh usloviyakh. // Cooperation of the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine in new political conditions*. Kiev: Fridrich Ebert Stiftung, 2014.

In the same interview, Lukashenka repeated his old words about the historical brotherhood with their Eastern neighbour, saying that Belarus would be on Russia's side in any conflict situation.⁴

The inability to solve the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in a military way, gave Belarus a new opportunity: to become a platform for the negotiations of the conflicting sides. Here, in Belarus, the most significant peace agreements were signed and were given the informal titles Minsk-1 (5 September 2014) and Minsk-2 (11 February 2015).

In common with the usual Belarus situation of total control by the state of the state-owned and the majority of the private media, the cautious attitude of the media to the Ukrainian crisis is quite understandable. State media continued to present Belarusians and Russians as brothers and published slogans supporting Russia "in a difficult situation". At the same time, they were being extremely cautious in the evaluation of Ukrainian events, but also avoiding straightforward language in order to not to "slip" into the information war.

Coverage of Euromaidan by the Belarusian media was deprived of emotional acuteness. Political and media analyst Paulyuk Bykowski, in his research on the coverage of Ukrainian events by Belarusian informational agencies, came to the conclusion that the Belarusian media, from different side of the political "barricade", were able to stay neutral and disseminate fakes or exaggerations.⁵ One of the main spokesmen of state ideology, editor-in-chief of the *Belaruskaya Dumka* magazine Vadzim Gigin, referred to the overall coverage in the following way:

Not so many of the world media managed to remain neutral in their coverage of Ukrainian events. To our credit, both official and non-official Belarusian media managed to keep that neutrality.⁶

The cautious behaviour of the official media, who do not manifest their unconditional support of Moscow, and avoid radical assessments, is based on the official position of the Belarusian government. Media "neutrality" mirrors the Belarusian authorities' wish to keep a balanced position between different "alien" interests and avoid supporting any of the sides as much as possible.

However, audience opinion polls demonstrate that the attitude of the majority of Belarusians to events in Ukraine is formed by the Russian media. Russian newspapers and TV channels waged a hysterical campaign of defamation of the Euromaidan participants, the new Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian nation as a whole:

⁴ http://belapan.com/archive/2014/03/23/689822_689823/.

⁵ <http://www.ibb.by/educational-program/news/rukovoditeli-pechatnyh-i-elektronnyh-smi-belarusi-obsudili-voprosy-osveshcheniya-ukrainskih-sobytyiy-v-belorusskoy-presse>.

⁶ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=124145>.

In a short – from a historical perspective – period of the acute stage of the Ukrainian political crisis of 2013–14, public rhetoric in the Russian information space has significantly changed. In essence, the hate speech made a jump from marginal to everyday language.⁷

Moreover,

after the annexation of Crimea, Russian propaganda went further than even the Soviet era, using the pre-Revolution Russian Empire's practice of full denial of national identity and political sovereignty of Ukraine and Ukrainians.⁸

Taking into account that three of the four most popular TV channels in Belarus are rebroadcasting Russian content and around 80–85% of the population believe in the news they receive from those channels⁹, Belarusians are de facto massively “bombed” by the hate speech propaganda. Therefore, one should not be surprised that in May 2014 two third of Belarusians supported the annexation of Crimea by Russia¹⁰, even though later (in November 2014) sociologists noticed a shift in the media behaviour of Belarusians caused by a decrease of trust in the information broadcast by these TV channels.¹¹

In conclusion of this section, let us sum up the general framework, in which Belarusian civil society was able to show its support to Ukraine:

- Pronounced neutrality of Belarusian authorities and state media;
- Continued authoritarian practices aimed at regulation of political and civil space
- The significant influence of Russian propaganda on the minds of Belarusians.

Belarusian support to Ukraine: collective and individual dimensions

To analyse specific forms of support to Ukraine, one should divide collective and individual actions. We are interested in the peculiarities of collective, public action as a specific feature of civil society.

⁷ Skorkin K. *Obshchii yazyk nenavisti // Common language of hate // Otechestvennye zapiski*. 014. № 6. URL: <http://www.strana-oz.ru/2014/6/obshchii-yazyk-nenavisti>.

⁸ Guseinov G. *Fashizatsiya antifashizma, ili Kak Rossiiskaya Federatsiya legitimiruet zakhvat Ukrainy // Fasciation of anti-fascism, or how Russian Federation legitimises the invasion into Ukraine // Gafter*. ru (23.03.2015). URL: <http://gafter.ru/archive/14620>.

⁹ *Mediasfera Belarusi. Sotsiologicheskii aspekt. // Mediasphere of Belarus: Sociological aspect. // Minsk: Informatsionno-analiticheskii tsentr pri Administratsii prezidenta RB.*, 2014. Pp. 28–29.

¹⁰ Vardomatski: *2/3 Belarusians support Crimea annexation // European Radio for Belarus* (11.07.2014). URL: <http://euroradio.fm/vardamacki-za-padzeyami-va-ukraine-sochac-40-belarusau>.

¹¹ *Belarusians started to “filter” Russian propaganda against Ukraine // Belsat TV* (18.12.2014). URL: <http://www.belsat.eu/be/programs/garachy-kamientar/belarusy-pachali-filtravac-rasejskuyu-prapagandu-suprac-ukrainy/>.

Collective action can quite often be personalised: in this case civic movement is represented by a single person who is the living bearer of its values and speaker of its demands – in other words, its symbol. For example, Mahatma Gandhi became the spiritual leader of India and led Indian people in their struggle for independence from Great Britain. Therefore, we associate the victory in this struggle with his personality. In other words, collective action can focus on one person who is not just a leader of this action but also a mythological symbol that unites the collective identity of supporters of a civic movement and allows them to feel their mutual support and commonality of goals. At the same time, this person represents values and objectives of this movement to external observers.

This distinction between “personal individual” and “collective individual” is important to evaluate in the organisation of Belarusian support to Ukraine. Mikhas Zhyzneuski, a Belarusian, who moved to Ukraine, became one of the first victims during the protests of Euromaidan, and, therefore, one of its symbols. On 22 January 2014 he was shot by a sniper. Later he was included in the Heavenly Hundred martyrs list. The Belarusian origin of Zhyzneuski provided the Belarusian national-democrats with a reason to define him as “their own” and as a “heroic symbol” that demonstrated the support to the Ukrainian revolution from Belarusians.

But was the tragic death of Mikhas Zhyzneuski related to some joint collective action of Belarusians in support of Ukraine? In his young years, Zhyzneuski participated in the mass protests organised by the Belarusian opposition, but he left Belarus at the age of 17 and joined the ranks of the radical right wing organisation UNA-UNSO. In some way, this life path can be explained by the forms of cooperation that existed between Belarusian radical nationalist organisations (White Legion, Belarusian Freedom Party, Kray) with their Ukrainian partners in the second half of the 1990s. In 1996, UNA-UNSO participated in the mass rally Chernobyl Way in Belarus; Belarusian nationalists participated in training camps in the territory of Ukraine. However, all these cooperation schemes developed outside the borders of “civil society” in its traditional definition; most of them ceded after the end of the 1990s.¹² Therefore, the emigration of Zhyzneuski to Ukraine and his participation in Euromaidan were related first of all to his personal motives and not to cooperation between Belarusian and Ukrainian organisations.

Still, the tragic death of Zhyzneuski brought about extraordinary consequences. Mikhas Zhyzneuski became a much-needed symbol for the Belarusian democratic community; commemoration of his life allowed to focus, the collective action of Belarusian

¹² The exception is the emigration to Kiev of Siarzhuk Vysotski, the leader of unregistered Belarusian Freedom Party who created in Ukraine “Pahonia” Centre for Belarusian-Ukrainian cooperation. It is difficult to estimate in what condition this party is now, since it underwent a series of serious organisational crises. There is no publicly available information about the activities of the newly opened Centre, either.

civil society, and give it specific goals and sense (commemorate the hero, help his family etc.). An individual act became a powerful impulse for solidarity.

Another type of individual action that manifested themselves in the collective dimension, is the participation of Belarusian volunteers in the so-called “Anti-terrorist operation” on the side of the Ukrainian military command. There is still not enough information to confirm the existence of the organised structure of Belarusian volunteers – “Pahonia” unit that was announced by the deputy head of the Volyn regional council Ihar Guz in July 2014.¹³ Facts that would prove the existence of this special unit are too scarce to make the proper analysis. However, there is evidence of the participation of Belarusians in military operations in Ukraine in the *Donbas* and *Azov* battalions. The most valid data seems to be coming from the survey organised by the *Tizhden.ua* website in Ukraine that indicated the participation of 80 to 100 volunteers from Belarus in all Ukrainian battalions.¹⁴

Participation of Belarusians in military units in Ukraine is promoted via social media, websites and newspapers, which add to its publicity. Belarusian volunteers participating in military conflicts became frequent guests of the media: their interviews served as a means of consolidation of support to Ukraine (albeit virtual) via reading and commenting on media texts. Volunteers realised the importance of this publicity and therefore eagerly give interviews and spread their own media messages. For instance, in early February 2015 three Belarusian volunteers recorded and placed online, a video appeal in which they commemorated the date of birth of the Belarusian resistance hero Kastus Kalinouski:

*We, Belarusians who fight in the East of Ukraine side by side with Ukrainians for our and their freedom, want to remind you about the significance of today's date. Today, on February 2, Kastus Kalinouski was born: a fighter and a revolutionary who died for our freedom and yours. On this day, we want to wish you the strength of spirit, aspiration for freedom and – Respect to our Motherland Belarus! Long lives Belarus! Live forever!*¹⁵

The reality, however, introduces changes into such idealised relationships between volunteers, media and a grateful audience. The first Belarusian, who received the award from President Petr Poroshenko, was Siarhei Karotkikh (nickname Maluta) who was infamous in Belarus for his ties with the Russian National Unity movement.¹⁶ That

¹³ *Creation of “Pahonia” Belarusian Unit Announced in Volyn Region* // European Radio for Belarus (07.07.2014). <http://euroradio.fm/na-valyni-zayavili-pra-farmavanne-belaruskaga-atrada-pagonya>.

¹⁴ Butkevich Bogdan. *Fighters. How Belarusians Fight for Ukraine* // Tizhden.ua (15.05.2015). URL: <http://tyzhden.ua/World/136344>.

¹⁵ *Belarusian volunteers from Ukraine congratulate Belarus with Kastus Kalinouski birthday* // Nasha Niva (03.02.2015). <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=143638>.

¹⁶ *Petr Poroshenko Handed Ukrainian Passport to the Former RNE Activist from Belarus* // Belsat (05.12.2014) <http://www.belsat.eu/be/articles/pyatro-parashenka-ruchy-ukrainski-pashpart-vyvedniku-z-belarusi/>.

unveiled an important trend that is often ignored by the Belarusian independent media: a significant part of the Russian far right nationalists (who are traditionally perceived as “Russian fascists”) quite surprisingly decided to support the Ukrainian side in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The stereotype of support is also blurred because Belarusians are also present on the side of separatists, although their numbers (despite the difficulties in counting them) are significantly lower than of those who took the Ukrainian side.

The individual nature of volunteer participation in military action is quite understandable. According to the Belarusian law, participation in military action on the territory of another country outside the structure of the Belarusian army is regarded as mercenary activities and is punishable by three to seven years in prison. A much less dangerous type of action is the organisation of humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian troops in Belarus. The position of the Belarusian leadership, who officially recognised the new Ukrainian government, makes such assistance legitimate, especially if it is organised via individual donations. The only sustainable and public initiative in this field is the initiative of a group of volunteers led by the Homel activist Andrei Stryzhak. He started from, organising assistance to parents of Mikhas Zhyzneuski and by the end of 2014 switched to a regular supply of medical and humanitarian assistance to military hospitals.¹⁷

Assistance to refugees from Ukraine is provided in a much broader way. Such assistance goes in line with state policy, since on 30 August 2014 Alyaksandar Lukashenka signed Decree No 420 that introduces numerous benefits for Ukrainians who resettle in Belarus after leaving the military conflict zone. Some non-governmental organisations (first of all, the Belarusian Red Cross Society) have actively engaged in collection of money and goods for such displaced people.

However, it is important to underline that Belarusian civil society (in its organised form of the community of non-governmental organisation) never fully mobilised for significant support to Ukrainians: neither during Euromaidan events, nor during military operation. Several initiatives listed above are private and individually led. This presents a striking contrast to processes in Ukraine itself, as well as in Poland or Lithuania where NGOs became the most active organisers of humanitarian and volunteer assistance.

It seems that the main reason for the “deviation” of Belarusian non-governmental organisations was the identification of the Ukrainian crisis as a “political” issue. Traditionally, only a small segment of Belarusian civil society is engaged in political activity, since such activities inevitably lead to repressive measures from the side of the state. This thesis is supported by the fact that only previously politically active civil society organisations dared to express their support openly for Euromaidan and the new

¹⁷ Усё пачалося з Жызьнеўскага // Радыё «Свабода» (26.03.2015). <http://www.svaboda.mobi/a/26921553.html>.

Ukrainian government. Showing support for the Ukrainian side is the business of politics or individual activists in Belarus.

The issue of Ukraine: declarations and statements

Based on the conclusions above, we have to expand the definition of civil society, which in other parts of this collection of texts is understood as non-governmental organisations or the “third sector”. We will include into it other actors, and first of all – political parties and movements.

The main division of the Belarusian political scene is related to the attitude of political organisations to the policies of President Alyaksandar Lukashenka. Organisations are divided into opposition and pro-governmental movements and parties.¹⁸ Our main interest concerns the statements of the political opposition that supports national and democratic values.

Before we analyse their statements, one should note that there is no unified assessment of Ukrainian events in the “pro-governmental” camp. Some of the pro-governmental organisations support the cautious and ambivalent position of the country’s leadership, denounce violence and support the territorial integrity of Ukraine. For instance, the chairman of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Belarus Siarhei Haidukevich on 27 January 2014 did not express support to either authorities or protesters in Ukraine, but supported the idea of the territorial integrity of Ukraine: “I am against dividing Ukraine – and that’s my main message. I wish the Ukrainian people unity.” The same pro-peace rhetoric was present in the statement of the Supreme Council and the Central Committee of LDPP made on 24 March 2014.¹⁹

The National Labour Party of Belarus took a radically pro-Russian stance. The political committee of this party “vigorously condemned the genocide of the Kiev authorities against the Ukrainian people in the East of Ukraine.”²⁰ The Communist Party of Belarus consistently supports Ukrainian communists, catching their military jargon about “usurpatory unlawful government”, “igniting nationalism and Russophobia in the Ukrainian society”, “Bacchanalia and mockery of joint historical memory by Bandera supporters” etc.²¹

¹⁸ *Political parties of Belarus – necessary part of civil society. Materials of the seminar.* Minsk: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003. P. 20.

¹⁹ Official webpage of the Liberal-Democratic Party of the Republic of Belarus. URL: <http://www.ldpb.net/index.php>.

²⁰ Official webpage of the National Labour and Justice Party. URL: <http://rpts.by/447/sostoyalsya-ix-vneocherednoj-sezd-respublikanskoj-partii-truda-i-spravedlivosti/>.

²¹ Appeal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus to Communists of Ukraine. URL: <http://www.comparty.by/obrashchenie-centralnogo-komiteta-kommunisticheskoy-partii-belarusi-k-kommunistam-ukrainy>.

Interestingly, the majority of political parties that usually eagerly support the authorities (Republican Party, Belarusian Agrarians Party, Belarusian Social-Sportive Party, or Belarusian Patriotic Party) did not publicly express any assessment of the situation in Ukraine. Taking into account that these parties de facto ignored local election in March 2014, they can be regarded as “political corpses” that are waiting for “resurrection” under some hypothetical extreme circumstances.

The majority of opposition parties and movements openly and clearly declared their support to Euromaidan and condemnation of Russia’s aggression. As Yury Chavusau wrote at the very beginning of the Ukrainian events (November-December 2013),

practically all opposition forces regularly made statements about the development of the crisis; many political leaders personally visited the Ukrainian protests (leaders of “For Freedom” Movement, Belarusian Popular Front, “Tell the Truth” and United Civil Party campaign spoke from Euromaidan’s podium).²²

Let us find answers to the two most important questions. Firstly, how coordinated were statements supporting Ukraine and did they reflect the closeness of political views and the possibility for joint activities? Secondly, did any practical steps follow the statements, did solidarity transform into something material?

The main form of support from the side of the political parties and movements were public statements by their leaders or numerous declarations adopted at party meetings.

We will quote here, as an example, public statements by BPF in support of Ukraine. The leader of BPF, Aliaksei Yanukevich, spoke on 6 December 2013 in the following way: “Today Kiev decides not only about the future of Ukraine but about the future of Eastern Europe as a whole. The BPF Party sincerely wishes success to all supporters of the European path for Ukraine and expresses solidarity and support to their struggle.”²³ The Deputy head of the party, Ihar Lalkou, on 31 March 2014 made the same statement:

In the name of the BPF Party I would like to assure Ukrainians that many Belarusians support Ukraine and condemn Russia’s aggression.²⁴

During the tensest period of Euromaidan the congress of BPF adopted a statement that openly expressed their support to the pro-European choice of Kiev protesters:

²² Chavusau Yu. *Two party coalitions – new configuration of opposition*. // Belarusian Yearbook 2013. Minsk: I.P. Logvinov, 2014. P. 142.

²³ Webpage of BPF Party. Yanukevich: Today Kiev decides not only about the future of Ukraine but about the future of Eastern Europe as a whole. URL: <http://narodny.org/?p=4780>.

²⁴ Webpage of BPF Party. BPF Party condemns shameful actions of Belarus’ representative in the UN and calls for solidarity with Ukraine. URL: <http://narodny.org/?p=5716>.

*A Free, independent of Russian imperialism and able to fulfil its people's pro-European aspirations, Ukraine is in the best interests of the Belarusian nation.*²⁵

Official statements of the same kind were made by other national democratic political parties (communiqué of the Congress of Conservative-Christian BPF Party; declaration “Hands off Ukraine!” by the Belarusian Socio-Democratic Party (Hramada) and others).

On 20 March 2014 Belarusian opposition parties signed a collective statement that condemned Russia's military aggression in Crimea and supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine. This joint action demonstrated the potential for alliance, despite of and within existing divisions in the Belarusian political sphere. The document was signed by the United Civil Party, Belarusian Socio-Democratic Party (Hramada), Belarusian Christian Democracy organising committee, “Tell the Truth!” campaign, “For Freedom” movement and BPF Party.

However, in general, it would be difficult to state that Ukrainian events strengthened consolidation of the Belarusian political sphere since joint declarations reflect only short-term coalitional agreements. Quite significantly, among those who refused to sign the joint letter were both right wing and left wing parties. I.e. the crisis did not inspire consolidation of Belarusian political parties, but rather strengthened the existing divide.

Conservative-Christian BPF Party did not sign the statement because it considers all other parties “pseudo opposition” and “political opportunists” and, therefore, refuses any forms of cooperation (although vigorously supports the Ukrainian side).

Left wing parties chose not to sign the statement as well, despite the fact that they belong to the opposition camp. They tried to come up with a collective statement at the anti-war conference on June 7–8 near Minsk. The main request from the Left wing parties and movements from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia was “to stop civil war”. Events in Ukraine got the following assessment: “The military conflict that took place after the actions of neo-Liberals and nationalists on Kiev “Euromaidan” took the lives of hundreds of people and inspired the unprecedented growth of chauvinism and xenophobia in the Ukrainian and Russian societies. The war allows the ruling elites of Ukraine to consolidate society around their political regime, distracting workers from the West and the East of the country from the struggle for their social and political life and putting them off one against another in the interests of the bourgeoisie.”²⁶ That document was signed by the leaders of the “Just World” leftist party that usually enters coalitions with the national democrats.

In public speeches the chairman of the party, Siarhei Kalyakin at first tended to align with parties from right spectrum by showing his support to Euromaidan protesters:

²⁵ Radio Liberty: The Congress of BPF Party accuses Ukrainian authorities in the political conflict. (25.01.2014): <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/25242226.html>.

²⁶ http://sceptis.net/library/id_3584.html.

The spontaneous people's revolution in Ukraine who removed from power the anti-national oligarchic clan ruled by Yanukovich.

Still, he names the far right nationalists and their anti-Russian rhetoric as the main “guilty” in the “civil war” in the East of Ukraine.²⁷ Moreover, in February 2015 Kalyakin publicly distanced himself from “inappropriate speculations” from the side of “Belarusian politicians who call themselves democrats” and fully supported the Belarusian authorities’ policy towards resolution of the Ukrainian crisis.²⁸

One more leftist party, the Belarusian Green Party, decided to withhold its judgement of Ukrainian events and did not make any public statement on that issue. At the same time, this party is quite active and supports many political initiatives. So, its silence about the Ukrainian issue is speaking for itself.

Some commentators claim that “Just World” and the Green Party have split internally due to the Ukrainian issue.

Two things are important here:

- Even though pro-Russian moods have spread quite actively in Belarusian society, there are not many political forces that would have the organisational capacity to mobilise those moods;
- There is no unity in the Belarusian political sphere; even closeness of political orientation does not allow it to overcome conflicts in relationships.

Unlike political parties, non-governmental organisations managed to consolidate in their support to Ukraine in public statements and declarations. These NGOs are united in the two biggest platforms: The Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs and the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. Already in January 2014, NGOs published a collective Appeal of civil society and civic activists in Belarus, regarding the Ukrainian situation, in which they asked all sides of the conflict to stop violence and find a peaceful solution to the conflict via negotiations.²⁹ After the victory of the Euromaidan supporters, on 24 February 2014, the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum that unites more than 60 organisations, published its own appeal. The appeal started with the following phrase:

²⁷ Kalyakin: *Force is the least perspective way of solving the Ukrainian problem* // Naviny.by (07.03.2014). URL: http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/03/07/ic_news_112_433095/.

²⁸ “Just World”: *Minsk agreements give hope that the “fratricidal war” in the East of Ukraine will be stopped.* // Belaruskaya Prauda (15.02.2015). URL: <http://belprauda.org/spravedlivyj-mir-minskie-soglasheniya-dayut-nadezhdu-na-to-chto-bratoubijstvennaya-vojna-na-vostoke-ukrainy-budet-ostanovlena/>.

²⁹ *Appeal of civil society leader and civic activists regarding the situation in Ukraine* // Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs (24.04.2014). <http://belngo.info/2014.zvarot-arganizatsy-j-gramadzyanskaj-supol-nastsi-i-gramadskih-akty-vistau-belarusi-z-nagody-situatsy-i-va-ukraine.html>.

In these days, filled both with grief and hope, when Ukraine is experiencing a turning point in their recent history, we appeal to the whole Ukrainian nation for solidarity and hope.³⁰

Belarusian civil society made collective appeals at the beginning of the second stage of the Ukrainian crisis as well, with the condemnation of Russian aggression:

We, citizens and representatives of civil society organizations of the Republic of Belarus, condemn Russian military intervention in sovereign Ukraine, accompanied by the introduction of Russian military forces in the territory of the Crimea and the armed seizure of strategic and communications facilities, by the Russian military, as well as the blockading of Ukrainian military bases.³¹

In early April 2014, representatives of civil society organisations that are members of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs, as well as BPF Party members, supported the UN resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine.³² In addition to collective appeals and statements, several civil society leaders (especially those related to the EuroBelarus consortium) supported Ukraine publicly as well: Uladzimir Matskevich, Ulad Vialichka, Andrei Yahorau and others.

One can see that civil society organisations that had a joint platform for coordination of activities (National Platform), made timely coordinated statements supporting Ukraine. Obviously, the National Platform and the Assembly of NGOs managed to consolidate their efforts in this sphere – unlike the political opposition.

At the same time, one should keep in mind that these two, the National Platform and the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs, unite only a tiny, although probably the most active, part of non-governmental organisations in Belarus. This potential for collective action that developed over the years was used to express public support for Ukraine. Still, the vast majority of Belarusian non-governmental organisations that are in fact, not part of these structures, did not demonstrate any solidarity.

³⁰ *On Solidarity with the Ukrainian People. Appeal of the Belarusian National Platform.* // Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs (24.02.2014). <http://belngo.info/2014.ab-salidarnas-tsi-z-narodam-ukrainy-zvarot-belaruskaj-natsy-yanal-naj-plyatformy.html>.

³¹ *Appeal of the National Platform: On Russia's Military Invasion into Independent Ukraine.* // Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs (03.03.2014). <http://belngo.info/2014.zvarot-natsplatformy-ab-vaennaj-interventsy-i-rasii-u-nezalezhnuyu-ukrainu.html#more-1876>.

³² *BPF supports the appeal of civil society for territorial integrity of Ukraine* // BPF official webpage (10.04.2015). <http://narodny.org/?p=5780>.

Support for Ukraine: protest actions

Organisation of public actions (pickets, marches, demonstrations) are another form of solidarity with Ukraine in Belarus. Alongside specific actions dedicated to Ukraine, we will review the presence of the Ukrainian topic in traditional mass actions that take place on a specific calendar date (Dziady, Freedom Day etc.).

Ukraine became the leading topic of public political activities in Belarus in 2014. Out of 52 protest actions of a political nature, 17 were dedicated to Ukraine and 14 were anti-Russian (growth of anti-Russian moods is also related to the Ukrainian-Russian conflict).³³ It is important to underline that Ukrainian events did not enliven political life in Belarus. Several public discussions on possibilities of the transfer of Euromaidan to Belarus “hot on the heels” came to extremely sceptical conclusions. The overall number of public protest actions grew only insignificantly: from 103 in 2013 to 127 in 2014. This growth was related to the legal opportunities to organise election-related pickets during local elections in 2014.

The crisis in Ukraine did not lead to an increase of protest and opposition activities in Belarus but set up its thematic framework. There is nothing strange in the fact that Belarusian political life (not only the life of the opposition) in 2014 was focused on Ukrainian events. What is interesting however, is that this issue was not used by the Belarusian opposition for the political mobilisation of the pro-Ukrainian part of the population. According to the audience research data, this part is a minority but could still form a significant resource for marginalised and bled white opposition that needs people with clearly stated views and active civic position.

The above-mentioned trend can be explained by the ambivalent position of the Belarusian authorities, which prevented the opposition from using the pro-Ukrainian mood of a part of the population. On the other hand, one can also notice the decrease of the mobilisation potential of political structures in Belarus, and their inability to attract people to street actions. In 2014, only two public protests gathered more than 1000 participants. One of them (the most large-scale) had nothing in common with institutionalised political structures.

The two most noticeable Ukraine support actions were organised by “exogenous” actors: The Belarusian football fans who were politically indifferent before. The First of them was a collective photo of Belarusian football club BATE fans who posed with white-red-white flags and banners saying “Hold on, Ukraine! We are with you!” and “Glory to

³³ Chyzhova Tatsiana. *Pratestnaya aktyunasc u Belarusi u 2014 hodzie (vulichnyya aktshyi, vybarchyya pikyetyem satsyyalnyya kanflikty)* // Protest activities in Belarus in 2014 (street actions, election pickets and social conflicts) // Political sphere (23.03.2015). URL: http://palityka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Chyzhova_Prately-2104.pdf.

Heroes!” This picture was posted online on 26 January 2014 and caused lively discussions as well as a wave of repressions against fans, who got administrative arrests. The arrests caused the next protest action: the leaders of Belarusian culture photographed themselves with the same slogans and added one more banner: “BATE fans are great guys.”³⁴

The most noticeable action, however, took place during the Belarus-Ukraine football match that took place on 9 October 2014 on Barysau-Arena stadium. Before the match, Belarusian and Ukrainian football fans agreed on this joint performance (despite historical grievances).³⁵ The stadium was filled with 10,000 fans, who were joined by thousands of TV viewers, since the match went live on-air. This is how the eyewitness Paval Belavus described what happened at the stadium:

*From the very first minute Belarusian and Ukrainian fans, that were sitting opposite to each other behind the gates, started signing jointly: the song was Warriors of Light by Lyapis Trubetskoy. After that the Ukrainian fans shouted “Long Live Belarus!” while Belarusians replied with “Glory to Ukraine!” Ukrainians, in turn, replied with “Glory to heroes!” All fans together sang “Putin is a d**khead” and “Those who are not jumping are Muscovites”... Despite quite serious security checks at the entrance of the stadium, it was great to see so many people with national symbols in the sectors. During the second half of the match, Belarusians took out blue-yellow and white-red-white flags. This unity, instead of confrontation, at the stadium, showed real brotherhood between the Ukrainians and Belarusians, their solidarity and mutual respect.³⁶*

The size of that event was bigger than of any action organised by the opposition that year. It was also important that the performance was co-organised with the Ukrainians. This is one of the very few Ukraine support actions in Belarus that got noticed and was discussed in the Ukrainian online media. The Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs gave Belarusian football fans the Champions of Civil Society award in the special category of “Creativity.”³⁷

Summing up, attempts of several political groups to use the Ukrainian events for political mobilisation did not bring about any significant success. This suggests that the condition of Belarusian institutional policy is quite dire and is characterised by apathy and fragmentation. At the same time, the relative freedom allowed some previously non-engaged actors, such as the football fans, to become more active. Despite all limitations

³⁴ *Cultural actors expressed their support to arrested BATE fans* // Nasha Niva (06.02.2014). URL: <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=122169>.

³⁵ *Belarusian fans will support Ukrainian ones* // Radio Liberty (29.09.2014). <http://www.svaboda.mobi/a/26611602.html>.

³⁶ *Belarusians shouted “Glory to Ukraine!”*, *Ukrainians – “Long Live Belarus!”* // Radio Liberty (10.10.2014). <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/26630373.html>.

³⁷ That was the only category where solidarity with Ukraine was mentioned.

and potential consequences, they managed to organise the only mass public, solidarity with Ukraine, action.

Public statements and political pickets, were indeed focused on Ukrainian issues, but those forms of activities were mostly aimed at increasing the political capital of their organisers. They allowed political organisations to show up in public spaces and appear in the media, but it is questionable whether such manifestation of solidarity were important for those who needed support.

Beyond politics: alternative forms of support to Ukraine

The final question regarding public support for Ukraine is the following: “How much did Ukrainian events (and the growing demand for solidarity) influence the emergence of new forms of activism?”

Let us briefly list here the new forms of activities, although there were not many of them:

Trips of Belarusian activists to Kiev with the aim of participation in Euromaidan. Due to the strict control from the side of the secret services those trips could not be publicised. However, the presence of Belarusian political activists at Euromaidan was confirmed by the media;

Fundraising for the relatives of the Belarusian Mikhas Zhyzneuski, who was killed during the protests in Kiev on 22 January 2014. For instance, on 25 January 2014 the BPF Party organised a Solidarity Marathon in its office. The “marathon” in fact was a concert of the singer Kasia Kamotskaya during which funds were raised for relatives of Mikhas Zhyzneuski.³⁸

In late 2014 – early 2015 a fundraising campaign for Zhyzneuski’s memorial started, that aimed at installing a memorial at the cemetery close to Homel where he was buried. Activists and political organisations joined that action that was coordinated in Minsk by the BPF Party.

Several civic and cultural educational events were organised by political parties and movements (Ukraine Day on 28 February 2014, organized by Art Siadziba initiative in cooperation with “For Freedom” Movement, evening of solidarity with Nadezhda Savchenko organised by the Belarusian Christian Democracy etc.);

Organisation of cultural events with the participation of Ukrainian artists: such as Okean Elzy band’s concert or the ethnic festival Kamianica with Banderband. Although these events were commercial and entertainment by nature, they became a suitable

³⁸ Radio Liberty: Marathon of solidarity with Euromaidan organised in the office of BPF party (24.01.2014): <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/25241387.html>.

platform for mass solidarity actions with Ukraine, especially when listeners and viewers waved Ukrainian flags.

Organisation of various discussions, seminars and conferences with discussions on Ukraine. The biggest academic event of that year, the International Congress of Belarusian Studies in Kaunas, Lithuania (3–5 October 2014) had the Ukrainian topic as its priority.

Finally, one cannot overlook the phenomenon of Sergey Mikhalok, who used to be the frontman of the Lyapis Trubetskoy band (before the band split in 2014). This very popular in the post-Soviet region singer's active support for Ukraine was an act of civic courage. His song Warriors of Light (Voiny Sveta) became the unofficial anthem of Euromaidan.

Conclusions

Coming back to the initial question posed in this article, i.e. how much the reaction to Ukrainian events allowed civil society to show solidarity, the answer will be disappointing. Only those organisations of the third sector that were engaged in political activities and “umbrella” networking structures before, managed to show their support. However, their solidarity acts never crossed the border of rhetoric and therefore never transformed into practical actions. Unfortunately, NGOs almost never engaged in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Part of the reason for that could be that some of these organisations are focused on external funds and writing projects, i.e. their activity cycle is the following: *writing grant application – receiving grant funds – implementing the project – report writing*. This approach does not give space for flexibility and quick reaction to new challenges.

At the same time, “exogenous” actors took the stage: Mikhas Zhyzneuski, the football fans at Barysau-Arena and Sergey Mikhalok with his Warriors of Light song and volunteers fighting on the side of Ukrainian army, became symbols of Belarusian support to Ukraine. Real acts of support came from those who took the Ukrainian troubles close to their hearts and rushed to help. The individual, personal nature of this support raises bitter questions about the potential of NGOs in organising collective actions outside their traditional mode of activities.

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