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By Way of a Preface

Dictatorship is a sign of collapse. Flowering epochs, characterized by a rich internal life, harmony of mind and spirit are alien to dictatorship. [...] Calls for a leader always occurs there, where old structures and customs, based on tradition, are succumbing or have already succumbed to disintegration.

Dr. Adam Wielomski,
“The Theory of Counterrevolutionary Authoritarianism,” in: Konservatyzm.pl

Belarusian society is a very specific creature. It is difficult to speak about the existence of civil society, as the basic institutions of such a society do not function here, or do not function properly. And it seems there is no particular demand for it; at least this appears to be the case based on the opinion of the majority of people. Non-governmental organizations (i.e., the third sector) do not serve this function as in other modern countries due to the political situation in Belarus, where the authoritarian regime effectively prevents the non-governmental sector from conducting its basic activities. Furthermore, for the further development of this sector, there is no base of socially and politically conscious citizens who understand the role that NGOs could play. It appears that

a large part of Belarusian society still adhere to soviet expectations towards the state apparatus, which results in the deterioration of individual responsibility, a reluctance to independently make decisions, and no need for free choice. In this situation – a situation of a clear threat from the state, extremely unfavourable legal conditions and, at most, indifference from potential beneficiaries – the non-governmental sector remains completely isolated from other sectors and therefore there are no possibilities of conducting programs externally directly, which effectively hampers its natural development and rules out increasing its popularity.

When there is no supply, there is also most often no demand. Therefore the third sector in Belarus not so much as-

sists other sectors in meeting the needs of citizens as attempts to shape these needs. However, the authoritarian state intentionally fails to meet some needs of society, often using them for its own purposes.

One of these unrealized roles, which the Belarusian state apparatus does not allow non-governmental organizations and the mass media to take on, is the educational function. The goal of state policy in this field is raising a citizen loyal to the authorities and with limited intellectual potential, which guarantees that he will be a submissive and rather non-inquisitive voter. The point is to create a passive society, susceptible to manipulation and propaganda, and therefore devoid of critical tools – unable to independently evaluate reality and express opinions. Many facts point to this, including the increasingly lower substantive level of the politically subservient state schools and scientific institutions, the idiotic programs on state television and in other mass media, oscillating between aggressive propaganda and the lowest form of entertainment,

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most frequently imported from Russia, the embarrassingly meagre cultural offer, even in large cities, etc.

When these types of activities reach the fertile ground of post-soviet society, their effect is the progressive demoralization of the citizens. From their earliest years they come into contact not only with the unadulterated sanctioning of corruption in the form of ubiquitous *blat* (pull), but the outright corrupting of entities and entire organizations by the state itself – this is about benefits, derived in exchange for loyalty, as in the case of access to BRSM-type formations, or *Bielaja Ruś*. The mechanism of demoralization in regard to children and young people is also effective due to the fact that a large percentage of teachers are members of electoral commissions on various levels, actively participating in falsifying election results – the situation becomes paradoxical when demoralized people, or at least people with an ambiguous conflict of conscious, are educating the young generation.

The state also scrupulously and successfully takes advantage of the situation in which there is no system of values, and the only social authority seems to be the president. After decades of enforced atheism, post-soviet society is not excessively tied to the conception of Christian morality, but even if it was the state preventively monopolized issues of faith, incorporating the Orthodox Church in its propaganda machinery. For building a modern, permanent national identity based on a universal system of values that could serve as a platform for patriotism and civic activity, Belarus also lacks a national idea, which cannot be formulated by casual, transitory political interest. Therefore, the system of values in Belarus has been officially replaced by state ideology.

It cannot help but be noticed that ten years of this type of state policy has exerted a huge influence on Belarusian society, both directly, leading to regression in the sphere of civic, intellectual, social and political activity, and indirectly, contributing to the ever increasing emigration of more independently thinking people, unable to find a place in this reality or submit to the authoritarian aspirations of the government. The uniqueness of today's Belarusian society therefore is also characterized by a lack of intellectual elites, or rather their very limited number and marginal influence on the situation in the country. In a normally functioning modern society it is precisely the elites who guide the basic directions of state development – on the social, political and economic levels. In Belarus, this remains firmly in the hands of the state apparatus, or more precisely, the president.

The texts collected in this book elaborate on some of the phenomena that have shaped, and continue to shape, today's Belarus. While working on this publication we asked ourselves, among others, whether the events of March 2006 changed anything and has some hidden revolution or evolution, at least on the level social consciousness, begun. Of course there is no unequivocal answer and that is not the point here. The situation appears to be quite pessimistic, but the fact seems to be important that despite the massive, long-term pressure on Belarusian society there are still cases of independent behaviour, testifying to the existence of minute underground islands of internal freedom, morality and social activity. And there are still people there who want and are able to subject this situation to independent analysis.