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INTRODUCTION

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We are pleased to present the new publication, which in some sense is the continuation of the book "Belarus: The Third Sector" published two years ago. As the previous publication generated significant interest both in Poland and abroad (the English-language edition), we decided to prepare a publication that updates the information concerning non-governmental organisations in Belarus, as well as illustrates the social processes occurring in this country in a way that raises many controversies and questions, i.e., the revival of national identity.

In presenting the social discourse that has engaged Belarus for years, we want to demonstrate the language and arguments that both sides of the conflict employ. We present the language of the regime's official propaganda, employing the old soviet rhetoric, which currently is based on neither a real system of values nor a real strategy. Censorship in historical literature and school textbooks is used for political purposes. Various types of cultural and artistic events are censored and closed. A recent event that upset the Belarusian scientific community was the decision of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Belarus concerning the appointment of the Chairman of the Belarusian Academy of Science. Even during the Soviet era the state did not so clearly interfere in the affairs of the Academy. The appointment of the Chairman is also connected with a change in the structure of the Academy and the interference of the state administration in personnel decisions. For the Belarusian Academy of Science this will

mean a loss of contacts and its expulsion from organisations associating academies of science from various countries, as only those organisations can be members whose governing bodies are selected internally by academy members.

In wanting to show this discourse in a broader context we included articles illustrating the dispute concerning the official language, national and state symbols as well as the history of the cultural movement in Belarus. The struggle for recognising the position of the Belarusian language is not only a struggle within the cultural sphere of this country, but it is also a struggle against the administrative aim of soviet cultural unification and limiting cultural life to that approved by the state. A similar policy is conducted in regard to every manifestation of cultural diversity as well as in relation to national minorities and various religious faiths.

All articles illustrating socio-political problems are woven around the main axis of conflict between the two cultural-ideological attitudes held by the Belarusian elite: the post-soviet, with soviet symbols and a belief in the need for eternal ties between Belarus and Russia, and the second, with Belarusian national symbols, a belief in the tradition of Belarusian statehood, originating from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and seeing a need to build an independent and neutral Belarus, oriented toward Europe. This dispute between the two elites is a sign of the deep and long lasting process of transformation that has been occurring in Belarusian society following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The process of change occurring in the elites is only one of its manifestations.

A change of elites is occurring in all post-communist countries. In various countries this process is occurring more or less painfully. It is however unavoidable for the development of each of these countries. The elites, able to exert an impact on the further development of the state, are the guarantors of success of all reforms undertaken in Belarus. These elites are able to free the country from international isolation, which results not from external factors, but to a certain degree from the fear felt by the Belarusian elites of operating in a global context.

This deep social conflict is difficult to define from the perspective of political disputes in western democratic countries, discussions between left and right, held in parliaments and preceding according to established rules. However, in Belarus, basic principles of political discussion such as the state's *raison d'être* and its independence, model of government (totalitarianism or democracy) and the role of society in the structure of the state are violated, as not only the model of government, state budget or other practical decisions are raised in discussion, but also the very reason for the state's existence. It is difficult to conduct such a discussion based on rational and pragmatic arguments inherent in political discussions as employed in the West. The participants of this discussion seem to have forgotten what their ideological disputes have in common with the everyday reality in which Belarusian society exists. They seem to have forgotten in what way general values and principles translate into practical methods of solving the social and economic problems of the country. They do not treat society subjectively.

Political elections in the country are taking on dramatic overtones. Their significance does not involve only the selection of a party or leader, but also a civilised and moral decision, which is difficult to make. This is even more difficult for Belarusian society, as it is subject to disinformation by official propaganda. It has no satisfactory and clear information concerning its own situation and the situation of the country in which it lives. There is also insufficient information concerning the essence of the dispute that is occurring around it. Therefore, the role of media and civic education is key for changes in Belarus. Elections are not a mechanism for changing the political elite in the country as long as they are based on an undemocratic election law, ruling out the possibility of the opposition gaining power. While not bringing any fundamental political changes, the presidential election in 2001 raised many questions among Belarusian society itself and provided it with more information, bringing society closer to current domestic events. The election also made it apparent that the authorities are losing control over society and that it will be increasingly more difficult for the authorities to maintain this control, even through employing fear tactics. The election also showed the opposition that society has a differing view and that it is seeking solutions that the opposition is currently unable to provide. The opposition's initiation of a dialog of partnership with society may be the only way of acquiring influence on the fate of the country.

The most important element of the process of change in the elite is the coming of age of the young generation, which will build its own system of values, seeking those that it perceives as real. This generation must establish its own position in this dispute and find its place through contact with society, which the elites have completely lost. However, the young generation is frustrated and often chooses social isolation and indifference to what is occurring in the country. For young educated people, the possibilities of developing a professional carrier are limited.

Therefore, emigration is frequently chosen as a solution. Interest is also growing in radical paramilitary organisations of various ideological stripes. The increasing degree of fascism in street life is one of the most unsettling phenomena.

Between these two groups is society, which has taken an indifferent attitude toward the continuing conflict of these groups. Society has long ago forgotten what the dispute among the Belarusian political elites involved, as neither of the parties to the conflict treat society as a partner. Society is apathetic and ambivalent toward the abstract issues that occupy the intellectual, cultural and political elites of the country. It no longer believes in a better world. Furthermore, it does not believe in its own power and the influence it can exert on the situation. At present, Belarusian society only dreams of living in peace and not dying of hunger.

Neither of the parties to the ideological dispute is trusted by society. The party that wins this dispute will be the one that first understands that apart from this dispute is a society simply waiting for leaders who will not ignore it. This is the most difficult test, which at present neither of the parties to the conflict is able to pass. As long as society remains an object, changes in Belarus will not be possible.

Social organisations are key to solving this stalemate. The activists of these organisations are people in direct contact with the daily problems in society. They understand these problems well and are seeking solutions to them. Moreover, they are part of the elites that are participating in the aforementioned conflict. Therefore, social organisations are divided into those that unequivocally support the current undemocratic regime in Belarus (usually created by government officials themselves) and those that are trying to mobilise society. The mobilisation of society, breaking down its passivity and apathy, can give Belarusian society its identity and the courage to decide its own fate. Such a society will create the basis for building democracy in this country.

Other than presenting the ideological discussion among the Belarusian elites, we also present certain changes concerning the legal situation of non-governmental organisations in Belarus. One of the issues under discussion in the present work is the participation of non-governmental organisations in social processes in 2001, and primarily in mobilising society to participate in the presidential election. Descriptions of the activities of various organisations as well as their addresses, included with this publication on diskette, are mainly meant for those readers who would like to have a better understanding of the activities of non-governmental organisations in Belarus.

Primarily young authors have participated in the current project. This includes both researchers and activists in non-governmental organisations, for which the present publication also provides an opportunity to promote the results of their work. It is our hope that a community of young analysts will develop in the future, who will engage in on-going social research in Belarus.