How Do Belarusians Perceive Democracy?

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Introduction by Cindy Hurst, FMSO

This article describes the Belarusian populace's skewed perception of democracy and why this perception exists. The author underscores that the mere perception of democracy by a country's citizens has a long-term impact on the potential for democratic practices to take root. Recent studies indicate that the majority of Belarusians define democracy only as 'the majority rule', with almost no concept of separation of powers, society's control over state institutions, checks and balances, political competition, and similar characteristics. According to the article, most Belarusians view the former Soviet Union's economic chaos and eventual fall in the early 1990s only as a result of democratic changes, and therefore see little reason to pursue the same political transformation. Moreover, Belarus' "state ideology machine" exploits "faults" in public consciousness about democracy in order to perpetuate its control. The author suggests that opinion polls should serve as key instruments to explain Belarus' sociological structures today. She recommends that political activists fighting for democratic values should use this data to improve their society's understanding of democracy, thereby increasing the chance for democratic development.

How Do Belarusians Perceive Democracy?

By *Alena Daneika*, Wider Europe

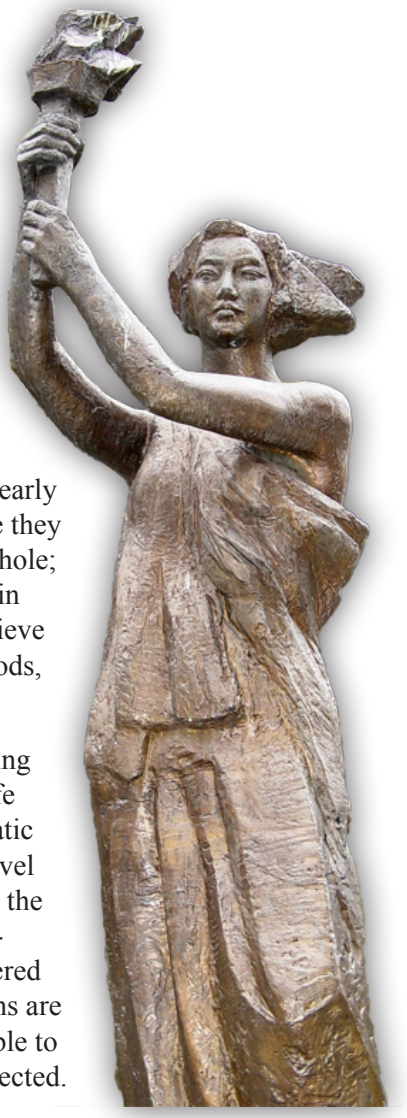
The modern understanding of democracy by Belarusian citizens as well as the absence of democratic tradition is the consequence of soviet totalitarianism and older historical upheavals on the territory of modern Belarus. Yet Belarus' independence in 1991 could have become a starting point for democratic transformation. Sadly enough, we can hardly claim that the country has made a push on this path during the years of sovereignty.

The majority of Belarusians are more interested in a system of state paternalism than developing Western style democracy, according to a national public opinion poll, carried out by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS, http://www.iiseps.org/data09-04121.html). Some 53.4 percent of the respondents surveyed indicated that "the state should take care of all its citizens and provide decent standards of existence for them." Only 27 percent supported the idea that "the state should establish the rules of the game, common for everybody, and make sure that no one violates them."

Society's attitude toward Western democracy was also reflected in answers to a question about how much influence the respondents believe they have over country, city, or community matters. Nearly three out of four respondents (73 percent) believe they cannot impact the situation in the country as a whole; 63 percent believe they cannot influence matters in their region, city, or village; while 52 percent believe they have no influence in either their neighborhoods, or even their streets.

"Pollsters conclude that Belarusian authorities rely on citizens being passive, and not active."

The majority of Belarusian citizens and the ruling elites do not associate success in all spheres of life with democracy. Up until now applying democratic values to the conditions of Belarus on the state level goes under the scenario that presumes preserving the form and omitting the content. For instance, elections take place in Belarus. Elections are considered a democratic concept. However, the way elections are organized at all electoral levels makes it impossible to consider 'representatives' to be democratically elected.



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> ***"...the majority of Belarusians define democracy simply as the 'the majority rule'."***

Also, there are no institutions exerting control over the actions of officials, formally elected by Belarusian citizens.

The majority of Belarusian citizens have allowed the state to usurp the right to represent public interests. According to the results of the June public opinion poll, IISEPS pollsters conclude that Belarusian authorities rely on citizens being passive, and not active.

Sociologists point out that democratic political change of the early 1990s led to economic chaos as a result of the fall of the USSR. In mass consciousness the rise of post-soviet democracy was not linked to material benefits that a democratic system guarantees. On the contrary, pluralism and democracy are a priori associated with chaos.

The state ideology machine makes the best use of the "faults" in this public consciousness. The lack of democracy in Belarus history and rudiments of political culture offer a fertile ground to escalate the concept of democracy as a synonym of instability and uncertainty.

Comparing the system of social organization between Western countries and Belarus, participants of the discussion initiated by the project *New Europe* (http://n-europe.eu/) pointed out that one of the problems allowing for options in 'interpreting' democracy is the very definition of democracy, which is not perfect. Olga Shparaga, co-editor of *New Europe*, sees a fundamental conflict in the fact that even democracy supporters do not take part in the life of the society. On the other hand, the majority of people have no idea

Maps provided by *maps.com*, *yahoo*, and *ESRI*.

> ***"part of the Belarusian society, although still relatively small, express an aversion to the current Belarusian political system and its approach to democracy.... the demand for democratic procedures is growing."***

how they can participate in it. Most Belarusians do not realize that democracy is not a perfect model that functions by itself, but rather a format that allows the option of raising issues and searching for solutions through participation.

According to Alexander Adamiants, chief editor of *New Europe*, the majority of Belarusians define democracy simply as the 'the majority rule'. Thus the concept of democracy is separated from other principles, such as separation of powers, society's control over the state institutions, the policy of checks and balances, political competition. These are concepts of a complex society where different groups of people, parties, and NGOs should come to agreement. There is no perception of this constituent of democracy that is more important than the majority rule. Adamiants concludes that the majority of the Belarusian citizens have ideas that coincide with what the Belarusian ideological machine tries to present as democracy.

Yet we cannot deny that part of the Belarusian society, although still relatively small, expresses an aversion to the current Belarusian political system and its approach to democracy. According to another IISEPS opinion poll, held in March 2010 (http://www.iiseps.org/data10-13.html), the demand for democratic procedures is growing. More than half of the respondents support the democratic order of the state.

As that still does not lead the citizens to assess policies and decisions of the current administration with a critical eye, the pollsters need to find out what Belarusians mean when they speak of 'democratic order in the country,' how, in their opinion, the political process can be made more democratic, and what role the respondents are ready to play in the democratization process. Only then can the conclusions about the growing demand for democracy make sense for those who are ready to adopt it.

For social opinion polls to serve as instruments for determining a strategy to work with the population, they should state and explain basic sociological structures of the society. The politicians, in turn, should use the data to recognize their mistakes and build further action plans and political platforms. In Belarus, political activists fighting for democratic values still do not consider public opinion polls as a main tool to enlarge their database of supporters. Nor do they view it as an instrument to correct the perception of democracy by Belarusians.