

Advocacy in Belarus: Experience of Civil Society Organizations

Short Version of the Research Overview



Секторный анализ

достоверные данные

для осознанных решений

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Advocacy in Belarus: Experience of Civil Society Organizations

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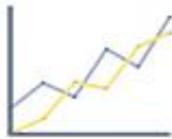
Theory and practice of advocacy are well studied in democratic countries, while in Belarus their systematic study is only at its initial stage. In this country advocacy exists predominantly in the form of individual cases rather than widespread practice and does not make it possible to identify its development trends. Advocacy is in the making, so tracing and describing advocacy development trends is not an easy task. Advocacy, however, may yield positive results in the context of Belarus. There are at least three examples of successful national campaigns over the past five years: promotion of the mechanism of contracting NGO social services by the state, accession to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and a campaign for the conservation of peatlands. However, more often even the organizers of campaigns have difficulty in assessing success of these campaigns.

The purpose of the survey was to study advocacy practices in Belarus, analyse key actors engaged in advocacy efforts, and identify specifics of their cooperation with state institutions from the point of view of obtained results, factors of success or failure of their actions, as well as the organizational capacity of advocacy actors as one of the prerequisites for effective advocacy in the context of Belarus.

We explored the 2010-2015 period, but if the campaigns were particularly significant we also studied them even if they were launched before that time.

The survey is based on the assumption that advocacy in Belarus is limited and only in some cases results in long term systemic change due to the country's **non-transparent processes of taking policy decisions** both at the national and local levels, as well as the **unfavourable socio-political context** for the implementation of civil initiatives. Along with that, the capacity of advocacy actors is important: their organization, their previous experience of cooperation with authorities, ability to conduct full-scale advocacy campaigns, which is also a determinant for advocacy. Considering this last remark, the following **working hypotheses** were made:

1. The success of advocacy in Belarus depends on:
 - a) areas of public life and campaign goals;
 - b) scale of activity (national or regional) of an organization/campaign;
 - c) characteristics of the state institution or governmental officials in charge;
 - d) track record and public image of an organization and – in some cases – personal qualities of people engaged in advocacy;



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- e) strategic organizational capacity of advocacy actors;
- f) politicization¹ of an issue targeted by the campaign.

2. In the current political situation in Belarus targeted *non-public* advocacy through personal relations produces faster, cheaper but similar significant results as compared to a public advocacy campaign.

Definition and meaning of advocacy

There are quite a few definitions of advocacy, and advocacy actors. In this work advocacy means *focused actions of various actors in order to change the existing policy or influence decisions of elites, government and state institutions by encouraging civic participation in the promotion of a common goal or a public interest* (Boris & Mosher-William 1998; Reid 1999). That is, advocacy includes a set of linked actions aimed at achieving systemic changes by influencing decision-making authority institutions (including elites) in order to find out solutions of public issues and change public opinion about them (Valachai, Kamarouska; Vidanava 2011). According to foreign researchers the number of organizations engaged in advocacy is not great even in developed countries. Therefore, there are not many advocacy groups and campaigns in Belarus either.

In this paper advocacy actors are organizations working in various areas of public life (human rights, environment, entrepreneurship/business, education, culture and enlightenment, etc.) as well as unregistered initiative groups and campaigns. Campaigns may be conducted collectively - along with other organizations - and individually.

Advocacy is as a rule a flexible and dynamic process, where the context, actors, and purpose of activities may change over time. It is often difficult to establish a link between advocacy activities and policy, legislation changes, i.e. whether the latter are actually the result of conducted campaigns.

To understand advocacy, it is essential to consider various levels of its implementation, which include *inter alia*:

- **change of the public policy and legislation**, including all stages of the political cycle from policy development to its implementation;
- improvement of the physical and social conditions, including **changes of the political, administrative, and public practices**;
- a shift in the **public attitude** towards a problem.

¹ The concept of **politicization** has numerous definitions. With due regard for the Belarusian context and attitudes towards personal achievement prevailing in the Belarusian society, in this work **politicization** is determined as the **transition of non-political problems into the category of political**, their acquisition of a political status and, more broadly, **viewing what one does or how one behaves as politically motivated** (Mac-Kim Donald K. 2004). Thus, speaking of **politicization in Belarus** we will mean **transformation of any non-political practices and problems into political ones regardless of the underlying causes**.

Despite the great diversity of advocacy activities, the following are essential elements: an urgent and clearly defined problem;

- a clear and a fixed goal;
- an action plan to achieve the goal;
- informing the public;
- periodic assessment of the effectiveness of advocacy process at its different stages.

In general, types of advocacy actions/tools can be divided into the following groups:

- a) **legal** (*litigation, dissemination of legal knowledge*);
- b) **political** (*looking for allies among politicians and public officials*);
- c) **public** (*awareness-raising campaigns, direct collective action*);
- d) **educational** (*workshops*).

With that, an advocacy plan may include one or several types of actions.

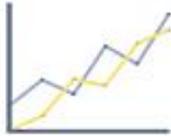
Considering the large scale of potential results and with due regard for the resources available for this survey, we focused **on the following types of results:**

1. Change of policy or policy implementation practices at various stage.
2. Results linked to the assessment of the strategic capacity for development of organizations in the area of advocacy. More specifically:
 - strengthening organizational capacity;
 - strengthening the alliance/alliances of organizations and initiatives.

The approach used to analyse results makes it possible to review and assess in a holistic manner advocacy practices in Belarus, focusing not only on evaluating the achievement of desirable political and public changes in unfavourable conditions, but also considering the **influence of advocacy on creating infrastructure and conditions for future change**, and also generally on strengthening civil society.

The legal context of advocacy is determined by the international and national regulations governing public relations in this area and by law enforcement practices. In Belarus there is no legislative definition of *advocacy*, therefore, for the purposes of this research international and national standards were reviewed relating to citizens' participation in public governance and regulations governing realization of rights to the freedom of information, assembly, and associations.

The performed analysis shows that the international commitments undertaken by Belarus include all necessary prerequisites to allow partnership of the civil society and the state. However, national legislation and law enforcement practices do not provide for any effective mechanisms of such partnership and need to be improved, as they to a great extent hamper advocacy processes and involvement of citizens in policy making.



Key advocacy actors in Belarus

Identifying advocacy actors and their number was fairly difficult. To do this, based on the preliminary study of the available information, we identified civil society organizations and campaigns, programmes, individual and collective advocacy projects in Belarus during the period in question.

As a result, main areas were identified, along which advocacy actors are working in Belarus:

- human rights, protection of the rights of minorities;
- development of the civil society sector, civic participation, right to freedom of association;
- cultural policy and awareness raising activities;
- liberty of speech and mass media;
- social policy, protection of the rights of people with disability;
- gender and equality;
- ecology, animal protection;
- entrepreneurship and business development;
- protection of the working people, trade unions;
- local, regional initiatives;
- other.

Methodology

The following methods were used:

- **case study;**
- **questionnaire survey;**
- **semi-structured interview;**
- **desk study, analysis of secondary data and analysis of legislation.**

Advocacy actors identified as the sampled population were further divided into two groups: **ten actors for the interview, and 40 actors - for the survey.**

Findings

The key peculiarity of the area is that **the main restriction and also the main factor determining the success of any campaigns, is a hypothetical politicization of a topic/problem being the focus of advocacy, i.e. whether the authorities perceive it as a political issue.**

Based on the conducted analysis, the following characteristics of the sphere of advocacy and advocacy practices can be distinguished:

1. Interviewed Belarusian activists interpret the very concept of 'advocacy' very broadly. They often consider that advocacy is almost entire activity of an organization, including implementation of projects to satisfy the needs of target groups and promotion of highly specific interests of an individual organization (lobbying).

2. With relatively few advocacy campaigns in Belarus they are diverse, cover a wide array of various spheres of public life, have different focus, and are conducted both at the national and local levels.

3. There are successful - although few - advocacy campaigns in Belarus both at the national and local levels, in which the initiators managed to achieve their goals: promotion of contracting NGO social services by the government, law against animal abuse, a campaign against peatlands draining, and some others.

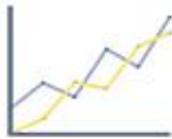
4. There are few campaigns, which fully achieved their goals during the period in question. Besides, in case of positive outcomes related to the promotion of legislative change, practical law enforcement does not correspond to what was intended. Predominantly the reviewed campaigns achieved intermediate results. As a rule, their positive effect manifested in strengthening the organizational capacity of the implementing actors and in generating additional opportunities for acting in alliance with other actors.

5. Advocacy activists do not show a high degree of awareness of other organizations' advocacy campaigns. Evidently, not all campaigns focus on making the general public aware of their activity. Still, activists are poorly aware of advocacy campaigns, which is the evidence of either low interest in public activities in other fields, or insufficient information provided by advocacy groups.

6. Negative results produced by some of the studied campaigns (when actors did not achieve their goals, and on top of that decisions of policy makers were contrary to what was expected) are also important. As we see from the analysis of the campaign against the construction of nuclear power plant, such results might increase risks for the activity of organizations - worsened relations with authorities, their refusal to cooperate - and also for individuals: harassment of activists by authorities.

7. When promoting legislative change the main target for activists is executive instead of legislative power. This is due to the specific nature of the division of powers in Belarus, where legislative power plays little role in the law-making process, while executive power has significantly greater authority in this area.

8. During advocacy campaigns their actors are very poorly involved in the policy making process. Although the research demonstrated that advocacy in Belarus is possible at most stages of the political process, discussions, putting forward proposals for solving problems still remain the main form of engagement without a guarantee or an opportunity of controlling their adoption, as well as follow-up/ monitoring of the implementation of a policy or a solution. With that, advocacy actors are mostly excluded from the important stage of decision making. This stage is indicated as the least transparent and least influenced.



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9. A typical problem with the engagement of advocacy actors in policy making is the simulation of such engagement, created by the authorities. The engagement of advocacy actors in the majority of the researched cases is either inadequate or formal; public authorities strive to replace actual engagement of advocacy actors with mere informing them about the decisions under consideration.

10. An important problem for advocacy is the lack of transparency of the decision making process of authorities in Belarus, including issues which are in the focus of advocacy efforts. This problem may be caused by the poor awareness of advocacy actors themselves about the structure and specifics of the political sphere of Belarus, however, this remains a general problem of the system of decision making. In addition civil activists have no or can hardly gain access to decision makers.

11. The very specifics of the civil sector of Belarus also creates problems: civil society organizations consolidate with great difficulty due to the controversies regarding common ground for joint activity, besides they rarely involve citizens in their activity.

12. The analysis of individual advocacy cases shows that advocacy is not a very common practice and a line of activity for the Belarusian civil society organizations and initiatives. The reasons could be the long-term and resource-consuming nature of the advocacy process, as well as high professional requirements for the organizations and initiatives engaged in these activities. Advocacy actors need a clear understanding of the purpose of advocacy, corresponding skills, a certain level of organizational development, and, besides, the attitude/belief that advocacy in Belarusian context is basically possible.

13. Advocacy campaigns in Belarus mostly intend to change (both adopt and repeal) legislation and/or enforcement practices. Activists also mentioned influencing the authorities as a separate focus. Along with that, during interviews respondents rarely spoke of the focus on changing the community's attitude toward the issue that advocacy targets. Perhaps they perceive this goal as something self-evident; or too much effort spent on influencing public officials and authorities leaves not enough resources for it; or activists assume that the change of legislation and its enforcement practices will gradually result in the shift of the corresponding public relations. Such approach to advocacy may be justified because of the context, in which campaigns are conducted in Belarus. However, it proves that they do not attach enough importance to civil involvement as an essential factor for improving the effectiveness of advocacy.

14. The findings of the assessment of advocacy campaigns in Belarus demonstrate that such campaigns in most cases lack jointly agreed actions of potential stakeholders. Even when a solution to a problem appeals to many, only some actors participate actively in the campaign. One of the reasons for that is that the key players are not motivated to engage / mobilize stakeholders/constituencies.

15. In Belarus, advocacy is in most cases a secondary line of activity for organizations. Organizations - ecological, social, human rights - have to get down to advocacy

due to imperfect legal environment, which needs to be changed in order to improve the conditions, in which they provide their core services to the population.

16. Advocacy is a type of activity contributing to the strategic development of the organizations engaged in advocacy, helps to adjust their strategies, missions, and improving their activity in general. Besides, advocacy may contribute to strengthening coalition ties with the counterparts in the sector and with the authorities. However, for most organizations in Belarus this type of activity is a side line, and very few of them would get any potential bonuses from advocacy activity.

17. Advocacy groups demonstrated mostly a high degree of their development in how they plan, implement and evaluate the results of campaigns, although as for the latter, the assessment methodology needs to be better studied. Besides, these organizations try to act flexibly, with due regard for the changing context, and if needed, can change and adjust campaign's goals in the course of their activity.

18. Advocacy actors use in their activity a wide array of tools both of public and non-public nature, including information sharing, education and all kinds of petitions. With that, the choice of tools of either public or non-public nature is not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. The choice of one of these types or their combination is determined by the specific focus of advocacy, a sphere, a public authority, with which one needs to interact, and other factors. Along with that, there is no single scheme, uniform regulations for conducting campaigns or any universal methods. The effectiveness of using public, non-public tools or their combination is determined on a case by case basis.

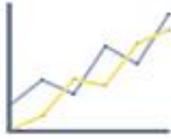
19. During the survey respondents did not speak specifically about using the Internet or social networks. Along with that, based on the studied cases, they used them a lot at various stages of campaigns. Such omission might be caused by flaws in the questionnaire, or because advocacy actors underestimate Internet as an effective present day tool for awareness raising, actualization of a topic, and changing people's attitude towards an issue.

Recommendations

1. When setting long-term goals advocacy actors should make them clear to understand and integrate the desired changes in public attitude to the advocated issues into the campaign plans. They should focus advocacy campaigns on changes ensured by decisions taken at the appropriate levels.

2. Considering that advocacy campaigns have not yet attached much importance to changing people's attitudes towards advocated issues, where possible, cooperate more intensively with traditional and new mass media, conduct PR campaigns to promote the issues addressed by advocacy campaigns, and inform the public of the significance of proposed changes. Such activity will allow gaining public support, even if only passive, broaden citizens' engagement and find proof points for promoting their goals when petitioning authorities. They will help to brush aside the objections of the authorities concerning the goal-oriented feasibility of the proposed changes.

3. To strengthen their own organizational capacity and improve the effectiveness in addressing key public issues, to gather and share reliable information on advocacy and on



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the civil society of Belarus in general all advocacy stakeholders in the country and abroad should enhance networking activities and engage the Belarusian analytical community - experts, researchers, think tanks, academicians - in advocacy campaigns, especially at the stages of problem analysis, goals setting, strategy development, and assessment of the effectiveness of advocacy campaigns.

4. Advocacy actors should document and present in the form of case studies all the materials of advocacy campaigns in order to preserve them in the institutional memory of the actors themselves and the advocacy sphere as a whole, take into account and use these materials for future campaigns, and also use this information for learning the history of the sphere, its analyses and studies.

5. Advocacy actors should ensure thematic exchange of experience about different companies, advocacy practices, peculiarities of their implementation in the context of Belarus, which will broaden access to information in the advocacy sphere, improve the understanding of advocacy agendas of the actors, and enhance the potential for joint actions of solidarity in this sphere.

6. Considering that the factor determining the success of advocacy campaigns is not so much public life itself (the problems of which are in the focus of advocacy campaigns), but the potential of these problems to be perceived by the authorities as political or non-political, advocacy actors, international organizations and development agencies should conduct and support a broader thematic range of civil advocacy efforts in Belarus. While planning or supporting advocacy campaigns they should take decisions based primarily on the readiness of the campaign initiators to long-term efforts to produce positive changes in public attitude towards the advocated issues and influencing decision making at the appropriate levels.

7. Actors of advocacy should consider as one of the primary priorities engaging motivated organizations/ initiative groups/ citizens in decision making, implementation and assessment of local initiatives in public policy and local programmes/projects by their active integration into advisory and coordinating councils along with authorities and other decision makers.

8. Considering the long term nature of most advocacy initiatives, low level of legal and political culture of the Belarusian society, advocacy actors, international organizations, and development agencies should use a program approach to the development of the sphere focusing on longer, at least two or three-year advocacy projects (multi-year projects) with mid-term assessment and a possibility of adjusting activity and budget revision in the course of their implementation.

9. Considering low awareness of advocacy actors of each other, advocacy actors, international organizations, development agencies, and implementers of donor programmes should initiate joint thematic activities for experience sharing and networking.