Democratic Views across the Baltic Sea

*Comparative Study
of Belarusian-Swedish NGO Cooperation in the 2000ˢ*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the partnership of Belarusian and Swedish NGOs in relation to democratic ideas, i.e. to compare the partners' representations on democracy and on the role the civil society has to play in the process of democratisation in Belarus. The Belarus Programme of Forum Syd within which a number of Swedish NGOs are running cooperation projects with Belarusian partners was chosen as the basis for this work. Qualitative in-depth interviewing is being used to provide for the data on the representatives' ideas on democracy and relevant questions, while document analysis gives an insight on the official point of view. Theories about narrow and broad concepts of democracy and theory on the role of civil society organisations during the transitional period are employed to ground the study, to guide the analysis and to reach conclusions. The results show that representatives of Belarusian and Swedish NGOs have similar basic understanding of the concept of democracy; however, specific tendencies can be traced in detailed discussion, like those regarding the role of elections, democratic citizenship, and the general viewing of democracy within its broad or narrow theoretical concepts. However insignificant these differences are, they can cause communication gaps in the process of cooperation.

Keywords: Belarus, Civil society, Democracy, Development cooperation, SIDA, Sweden, Representations

"We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are"[1]

Anais Nin

INTRODUCTION:

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, the countries of the post-Soviet block stepped into a challenging period of transition. The majority of them took a course for democratisation, one of them being the Republic of Belarus. However, the dramatic changes in the state policy caused the adaptation of a new Constitution in November 1996, which provided the president with a legal basis to dominate over all the branches of power. Thus, the process of democratisation was stopped and later reverted, and now the situation in the country is described as an authoritarian regime. It has also been named an "elected dictatorship"[2] because some elements of democracy, for example, elections on different levels of power, are still present. For this reason Belarus has become a matter of concern for the developed Western world within the context of the expanding idea of global democratisation.

According to Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996), consolidated democracies need to have in place five interactive arenas to reinforce one another, in order for such consolidation to exist. These are: a) an autonomous and valued political society, b) the rule of law to ensure legal guarantees for citizens' freedoms, c) state bureaucracy that is usable by the new democratic government, d) institutionalised economic society, along with e) a free and lively civil society, to which a great role is being ascribed[3].

The concept of "civil society" is not at all new: many social theorists, like Hegel, Tocqueville, Parsons have dealt with it in their works. This concept has got a great number of interpretations, but for modern political science one idea is obvious – civil society plays a crucial role in the process of democratisation[4]. Following the theoretical discourse, in the 1990s, the concept of

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[1] Nin, Anais. *Collection of quotes.* Retrieved from http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/anais_nin/, quoted 10-05-2004

[2] Korosteleva, E.2003. *Introduction,* in Korosteleva, E.et al (eds). 2003. "Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship", Routledge: Curzon, p.15

[3] Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, p. 5

[4] See Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press; Schmitter, Ph. 1996. "Razmyshlenija o grazhdanskom obschestve i konsolidatsii demokratii". *Polis,* 5. Moscow: Ideja-Press; Axel Hadenius and Fredrik Uggla. 1998. *Shaping Civil Society* in "Civil Society and International Development" by Amanda Bernard, Henny Helmich, and Percy B. Lehning (eds). Paris: OECD Publications.

civil society was accepted both by the public and the private Western development co-operation agencies as a tool in fostering democratisation in developing countries.

As far as Belarus is concerned, during the Soviet regime, public associations existed as a part of the Communist system, that is, in the form of state-controlled associations financed by the government, whose major goals were to strengthen the socialist ideology and to build the communist society. Belarus' separation from the USSR facilitated the process of the formation of an independent civil society.[5]

For civil society to play an active role in the social processes, an enabling environment is needed, that is a set of interrelated conditions (legal, political, fiscal, informational, and cultural)[6]. In case of Belarus, during the recent 8 years, the authoritarian regime has created conditions that are hampering, rather than favouring the consolidation of civil society. In response, a number of developed Western democracies, while possessing economic and political resources, found themselves in place to assist the country's pro-democracy activists to create better conditions for civic engagement. Sweden is one of the countries that have shown deep concern regarding the anti-democratic developments in Belarus. At the present moment, a number of programmes are funded by the Swedish government to support the process of democratisation in the country, however slow or even backsliding it may be[7].

One of the most significant directions of Swedish developmental aid is support to the bilateral cooperation between Swedish and Belarusian NGOs. Unlike developmental aid provided by other countries, Sweden supports cooperation between NGOs of the two countries, rather than simply providing funding to Belarusian NGOs[8]. In this case, Belarusian NGOs have an opportunity to adopt professional methods of more experienced Swedish NGOs, while the Swedish NGOs learn new approaches to NGO cooperation work from their partners. On the individual level, creating personal contacts between people working to achieve similar goals can do much more than purely material assistance. For these reasons, the partnership of Belarusian and Swedish NGOs is the focus of my study.

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[5] Protko, Tatiana. 1999. *Problems of the Formation of a Civil Society in Belarus (1995-1999)* in "Analytic Bulletin of Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies", March 1999, Issue 1(11). Retrieved from http://www.internews.ru/iiseps/11/5.html, quoted 01-10-2002

[6] Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press;

[7] See *Country strategy for development cooperation. Belarus. January 1, 2002 – December 31, 2004.* Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for Central and Eastern Europe, 17 October, 2002. Sweden.

[8] This is not to say that Belarusian NGOs do not cooperate with NGOs from other countries, however these partnerships are unsystematic and are not initiated on the state level.

Belarus, unlike Sweden, does not have a long history of independence, democratic rule, and civil society. Even in the late 1980s, the time of strong political movements for independence in the Soviet block, Belarusians did not show signs of active civic engagement[9]. This would possibly indicate that Belarusians, even those active in NGOs, may have different ideas about democracy than Swedes. As a result of this, I further assume that the way the Belarusian and Swedish partners see the role of the NGOs in a democratisation process differs considerably. As they are working together in the projects aimed at democratisation of the country, it is therefore of interest to study the eventual differences in the partners' views on democracy, and how NGOs can contribute to democratisation.

Thus, the aim of my study is to explore the partnership of Belarusian and Swedish NGOs in relation to democratic ideas. The questions that I want to answer are:

1) Do the Belarusian and Swedish partners share the same ideas of democracy? If not, in which way are they different?

2) Do Belarusian NGOs and Swedish NGOs involved in partnership see democratisation of Belarus as a strategic goal of their activities? If yes, how do they perceive the role of an NGO in the process of democratisation?

I will base my study on the Belarusian programme of the Forum Syd, which is at the moment the biggest programme administrating Belarusian-Swedish NGO partnership projects. To answer my research questions, qualitative method have been used, including the following procedures of collecting the data:

a. in-depth interviews in Belarus and Sweden with the representatives of the partnership organisations, as well as with the leader of the Forum Syd Belarusian programme from the Swedish side, and a contact person of Forum Syd in Belarus;

b. document analysis of the official resolutions of the Swedish government, and guidelines for partnership from Sida for development cooperation.

The empirical material collected during the study have been regarded through the theoretical framework of the narrow vs. broad concepts of democracy, and theoretic considerations on civil society's role in the period of transition from authoritarian to democratic regime.

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[9] Mark Lenzi. 2002. *Lost Civilization: The Thorough Repression of Civil Society in Belarus* in "Democratizatsiya", Vol.10, No. 3

Despite a huge interest from scholars to the democratisation and civil society formation in post-Communist countries, Belarus has not been paid major attention, though it presents an interesting case from the point of view of the anti-democratic developments on its territory after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Neither have eventual differences in post-Soviet vs. West European visions of democracy and the role civil society has to play in the process of democratisation been studied. Moreover, I believe that the results of this study may be applicable to other countries of the former Soviet Union[10] as well. A majority of them are still going through a transition period, and are assisted by the West in their democratisation efforts. The conditions with regard to civil society, which the Western practitioners find in this area, are quite similar due to the Soviet legacies. Thus, the perceptions of democracy and civil society in these countries are likely to coincide. Therefore, the results of this study would be relevant both for further accumulation of theoretical knowledge on the phenomenon of civil society, and for the practical use of Swedish International Development Agency, as well as Swedish and Belarusian NGOs, which either run partnership projects, or intend to start such projects.

II. IDEAS OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY'S RELEVANCE

2.1 Different Views of Democracy

The concept of democracy is a much researched one. The literature on democracy is so immense, that it is impossible to mention all the views of it within the scope of one work. It is obvious, that different people have different ideas of democracy depending on their background, cultural values and, what is more, point of time at which they lived or still live. Through history, this concept has had a wide spectrum of meanings. What was understood as democracy in classical Athens differs from what may be understood as democracy today[11].

Literally, "democracy" comes from the Greek words "demos" and "cratein", meaning "rule by the people". Thus, the concept of democracy comprises of two essential components: "rule" and "people". One may thus distinguish at least two approaches to democracy: one based on the meanings of 'rule' and another on what may be included in 'people'. The latter approach can be defined as the one centering on the problem of political inclusion. What constitutes a "people" that are entitled to rule – ethnic kinship or geographical unity? [12] Though this issue is of major importance if one wants to grasp the meaning of democracy to a full extent, I have not considered it in my work. Rather, I focus on the other part of the concept, which is the

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[10] From these I exclude Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as their transition to democracy can be regarded as officially finished with their entrance to the EU on May 1, 2004.

[11] Lane, Jan-Erik and Svante Ersson. 2003. *Democracy. A comparative approach.* London: Routledge, p. 25

[12] Assarson, Jan and Axel Hadenius. 1994. *Democracy in the Baltic Region.* Uppsala: Uppsala University, p.4

democracy as "rule", concentrating on what constitutes a democratic system and what are the criteria that characterise a democratic state. Following this approach, Lane Jan-Erik, and Svante Ersson suggest that one may identify two basic conceptions: one narrow, focusing on democracy as a system of government, and a broad conception suggesting that democracy is something more than just a system of government, but rather implies social and economic equality[13]. Likewise, Lars Rudebeck distinguishes between two distinct but closely interrelated dimensions of democracy. The first one is its consceptualisation as a form of rule characterised by *universal suffrage, regular elections and basic civil rights,* and, on the other hand, democracy conceptualised as *political equality in actual practice[14].* Further, I will consider these two concepts in more detail.

2.1.1 Narrow Concept of Democracy.

This approach can also be referred to as *minimalist*, because it is an operational definition limiting democracy to its most essential institutional – constitutional, procedural – manifestations[15]. These manifestations traditionally serve as criteria for discriminating between democratic and non-democratic systems of government. In this way, the definition of a democratic governmental system is limited to include three major components: *political representation, political participation,* and *guarantees of basic civil rights and liberties*. I will further elaborate on what stands behind these three concepts. To provide for some framework, I will refer to the list of criteria suggested by Robert Dahl, one of the most prominent modern political scientists, whose definition of democracy is considered to be one of the most comprehensive ones.

Political representation stands at the core of any democratic system since it allows people to express their will through electing their representatives to the ruling organs. It was the English 17th century's philosopher Hobbes who first maintained that representation is essentially a process of authorization, i.e. Members of Parliament, or Congress are people who have been authorised by the process of election to exercise certain powers[16]. The idea of political representation was later associated by Joseph A. Shumpeter with the mechanism of democratic decision-making:

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[13] Lane, Jan-Erik and Svante Ersson. 2003. *Democracy. A Comparative Approach.* London: Routledge, p. 25
[14] Rudebeck, Lars. 2002. "On the Twofold Meaning of Democracy and Democratisation" in Rudebeck, Lars (ed) *Democracy, Power and Partnership.* Uppsala: The Collegium for Development Studies, p. 5
[15] Ibid., p.5
[16] Birch, Anthony H. 1993. *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy.* London: Routledge, p. 74

the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realises the common good by making people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will[17].

In today's understanding of democracy, the concept of political representation is closely connected to the institute of elections and thus can be referred to the following characteristics of democracy by Robert Dahl:

- control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials;
- elected officials are chosen and peacefully removed in frequent, fair, and free elections in which coercion is absent or quite limited.[18]

Political participation. Democratic theorists from Rousseau in the 18th century and onwards assumed that a proper system of government must provide opportunities for *political participation* by the ordinary citizen. Anthony H. Birch emphasises the opportunity to vote in periodic competitive elections as the minimum condition that a governmental system must satisfy to qualify as democratic:

… the case for political participation is essentially a case for substantial numbers of private citizens (as distinct from public officials or elected politicians) to play a part in the process by which political leaders are chosen and/or government policies are shaped and implemented. [19]

Robert Dahl has also stressed the importance of the voting, maintaining that the following criteria are required from a democratic system:

- virtually all adults have the right to vote;
- most adults have the right to run for public offices in these elections.[20]

However, being an essential manifestation of political participation, voting is certainly not enough for citizens to express their will in a democratic state. Further opportunities and forms of political participation such as those suggested by Birch may also be highly desirable:

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[17] As quoted in Lane Jan-Erik, and Svante Ersson. 2003. *Democracy. A comparative approach.* London: Routledge, p. 28
[18] Dahl, Robert A. 1991. *Modern Political Analysis.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, p. 73-74
[19] Birch, Anthony H.1993.*The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy.* London: Routledge, p. 80
[20] Dahl, Robert A. 1991. *Modern Political Analysis.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, p. 73-74

- canvassing or otherwise campaigning in elections;

- active membership of a political party or a pressure group;

- taking part in political demonstrations, industrial strikes with political objectives, rent strikes in public housing, and similar activities aimed at changing public policy;

- various forms of civic disobedience, such as refusing to pay taxes or obey a conscription order;

- membership of government advisory committees;

- client involvement in the implementation of social policies;

- various forms of community action, such as those concerned with housing or environmental issues in the locality.[21]

Political participation is important for a democratic system in a number of ways. First of all, the rulers get informed about the problems, needs and attitudes of the citizens and community they govern. Another important point is that political participation is likely to increase the propensity for citizens to comply voluntarily with governmental rules and orders. If people have had the opportunity to play some part in the selection of public officials, to communicate their views on public issues, and to exert pressure on decision makers, they are more likely to accept that governmental decisions are legitimate, even if disliked, than would be the case if citizens did not have such opportunities.[22]

The concept of political participation is closely interconnected with that of democratic citizenship. To be more exact, active democratic citizenship, which Judith Shklar (1991) defined as follows:

> The good democratic citizen is a political agent who takes part regularly in politics locally and nationally, not just on primary and election day. Active citizens keep informed and speak against public measures that they regard as unjust, unwise, or just too expensive. (...) Although they do not refrain from pursuing their own and their reference group's interests, they try to weigh the claims of other people impartially and listen to their arguments. They are public meeting-goers and joiners of voluntary organisations who discuss with others about the politics that will affect them all, and who serve their country not only as taxpayers and occasional soldiers, but by having a considered nation of the public good that they genuinely take to heart.[23]

This would seem as quite a comprehensive list of qualities required from active citizens. Some structure, however, should be brought in this multiplicity. Axel Hadenius suggests that it is

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[21] Birch, Anthony H.1993.*The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy.* London: Routledge, p. 80
[22] Ibid, p.81
[23] Shklar, Judith in Hadenius, Axel. 2001. *Institutions and Democratic Citizenship.* New York: Oxford University Press, p. 17

fruitful to distinguish between traits that we bear as individuals, and those which join us to the various collectivities of which we are a part. In this way, scholars of political participation, such as Sidney Verba, and Norman Nie, distinguish between "individual-based" and "group-based" forces driving political activity, and find that the effects of these factors on political behaviour are distinct but mutually reinforcing.

When we speak about the individual level, we refer to certain attitudes associated with active citizenship, such as a developed political interest, a desire to become involved, and with to exert influence. The citizens should also have a firm faith in their ability to make their voices heard. In their basic political attitudes, moreover, they should be open, tolerant, and broad-minded.[24]

However, possessing certain attitudes is not enough. Citizens should have certain resources which would reinforce the attitudes in question. These embrace civic skills of various kinds, which include political competence and capacity: keeping well-informed on political and other questions, being able to take initiatives. While talking about political resources, it is important to mention access to "time and money". A citizen should have free time to spend on political activities, and economic resources to contribute the activities and candidates that one supports. Another important point to make is the autonomy of a citizen, who is not dependent on the state in his basic needs, and thus, possesses an opportunity to act as he/she deems necessary.

When it comes to the collective dimension of citizenship, interest centres not on private individuals, but rather on relations between individuals. Here, we too can distinguish between attitudes and resources. The former is to do with feelings of trust and affinity between people: an experience of identification with a larger whole, and recognition of obligations towards it. It involves the emotive bonds of trust and solidarity with a unit of people to which we belong, and which drives us to act out of the considerations what is good for the collective in question. These attitudes are closely connected with a concept known as political culture. This concept implies that differences in preferences and in organisational structures between different societies can be explained on the basis of the overarching belief systems that dominates the given society. It is often assumed that such predominant beliefs are historically inherited and passed on through a continuous process of socialization.[25]

As far as resources are concerned, the question is what real possibilities exist for co-ordinated and collective action, that is the associational patterns of a given society: how they are

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[24] Hadenius, Axel. 2001. *Institutions and Democratic Citizenship.* New York: Oxford University Press, p. 18
[25] Ibid.

configured, which fixed and routinised forms for cooperation between people exist, and how they affect the prevailing identities in society.[26]

Basic civil rights.

We live in an age in which it has become common for people in democratic societies to invoke the concept of rights in political discourse. Any state claiming to be democratic is supposed to guarantee its citizens to observe a number of civil rights which are summed up in the last three criteria of Robert Dahl:

- citizens possess a right, effectively enforced by judicial and administrative officials, to freedom of expression, including criticism of and opposition to the leaders or party in office;
- citizens have access, and an effectively enforced right to gain access, to sources of information that are not monopolised by the government of the state, or by any other single group;
- citizens possess an effectively enforced right to form and join political organisations, including political parties and interest groups.[27]

According to Dahl, civil rights are contractual in their nature, that is they are based on a legally binding contract. The contracts essentially confer rights upon one of the signatories and impose obligations on the other[28]. We can regard the Constitution of a country as a legal contract between a citizen and a state, that is it should guarantee the rights mentioned above.

2.1.2 Broad Concept of Democracy

The broad concept of democracy can be outlined as a concept associated with demands for political, social and economic equality. It holds that it is not enough for a state that claims to be democratic to have a democratic system of government in its minimal institutional manifestations, rather a democratic state should guarantee all types of equality and a decent life for its citizens. To illustrate this conception of democracy, let me quote from MacPerson:

> As soon as democracy is seen as a kind of society, not merely a mechanism of choosing and authorizing governments, the egalitarian principle inherent in democracy requires not only 'one man, one vote' but also 'one man, one equal effective right to live as fully humanly as one wish'.[29]

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[26] Ibid., p.20
[27] Dahl, Robert A. 1991. *Modern Political Analysis.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, p. 73-74
[28] Ibid., p.115
[29] Ibid.

A number of theoreticians can be mentioned here, who considered democracy from the "equality perspective". Thus, Harold Laski holds that economic equality became "a permanent part of the democratic creed" [30] already at the time of French revolution. Naess even claimed that, up until the mid-nineteenth century, democracy "first of all implied social equality"[31]. MacPerson also states: "democracy in the broad sense requires not just equality but also freedom from starvation, ignorance, and early diseased death"[32].

To get deeper into this vision of democracy, I will look closer at the thinking of the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, who contributed significantly into the development of this concept. According to his position, people's equal autonomy "in the determination of the conditions of their own lives"[33] is intrinsic to democracy, and as soon as we go beyond the most private sphere, such autonomy has by necessity to be exercised together with others. In his book "Development as Freedom", Amartya Sen states that in a democratic state people should have the overall freedom to live the way they would like to live. He discusses five instrumental freedoms that contribute directly, or indirectly, to the overall freedom. These are: a. political freedoms; b. economic facilities; c. social opportunities; d. transparency guarantees; e. protective security.

Political freedoms refer to the opportunities that people have to determine who should govern and on what principles, and also include the possibility to scrutinize and criticise authorities, to have freedom of political expression, to enjoy the freedom to choose between different political parties, and so on.

Economic facilities refer to the opportunities that individuals respectively enjoy to utilize economic resources for the purpose of consumption, or production, or exchange. The economic entitlements that a person has will depend on the resources owned or available for use as well as on conditions of exchange, such as relative prices and the working of the markets. Furthermore, distributional considerations are important in the relation between national income and wealth, on the one hand, and the economic entitlements of individuals (or families), on the other.

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[30] As quoted in Lane, Jan-Erik, and Svante Ersson. 2003. *Democracy. A comparative approach*. London: Routledge, p. 25
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.,p.26
[33] As quoted in Rudebeck, Lars. 2002. "On the Twofold Meaning of Democracy and Democratisation" in Rudebeck, Lars (ed) *Democracy, Power and Partnership*. Uppsala: The Collegium for Development Studies, p. 5

Social opportunities refer to the arrangements that society makes for education, health care, and so on, which influence the individual's substantive freedom to live better. These facilities are important not only for the conduct of private lives (such as living a healthy life and avoiding preventable morbidity and premature mortality), but also for more effective participation in economic and political activities.

Transparency guarantees deal with the need for openness that people can expect: the freedom to deal with one another under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity. When that trust is seriously violated, the lives of many people – both direct parties and third parties- may be adversely affected by the lack of openness.

Protective security is needed to provide a social safety net for preventing the vulnerable population from being reduced to abject misery, and in some cases even starvation and death. The domain of protective security includes fixed institutional arrangements such as unemployment benefits and statutory income supplements to the indigent as well as ad hoc arrangements such as famine relief or emergency public employment to generate income for destitute.[34]

2.1.3   Correlation between the Two Concepts.

The broad and the narrow concepts present from the first sight different ideas of what a democratic state is. However, after a more consistent analysis, the close correlation between the concepts is vivid.

Figure 1. Correlation between the broad and the narrow concept of democracy.

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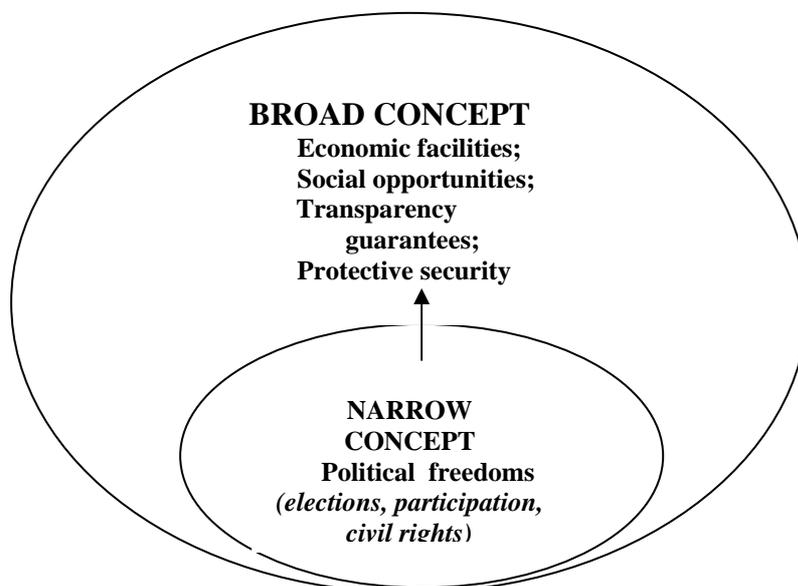
[34] Sen, Amartya.1999.*Development as Freedom.* Oxford:Oxford University Press, pp. 38-40

The Figure 1 was drawn by the author to show the relation between these two ideas. According to it, the concepts do not represent totally different approaches to the theoretical discussion of democracy. Rather, the broad concept is in itself a further development of the narrow concept. Even if the broad concept emphasises social and economic equality in the society, and suggests that democracy is more than a system of government, it still includes the basic political mechanisms of democracy.

2.2 Civil Society and its Impact on Democratisation.

Many scientists see a clear connection between the development of civil society and that of the political system, to be more exact they consider that an active civil society is crucial to the vitality of political democracy.

Robert Putnam states that civic groups are related to democratic stability in two ways: internally, civic groups inspire habits of cooperation, solidarity, public-spiritedness, and trust; externally, these networks then aggregate interests and articulate demands to ensure the government's accountability to its citizens.[35] Following his argument, Axel Hadenius and Fredrik Uggla ascribe pluralist and educational functions to civil society, which roughly coincide with external and internal functions consequently[36].

However, the functions mentioned above are typically relevant for the established democratic regimes, while Belarus is not the one. Though I do not exclude the possibility of the NGOs to perform these functions even at the stage of transition from authoritarian to democratic regime, more focus is needed and specific missions and roles ascribed to NGOs in this period are to be regarded. I believe the list of missions suggested by William D. Carmichael is relevant in this case:

- *Charting new relationships with government.* Under very repressive authoritarian regimes, the nature of these relationships can simply be described as one largely of opposition and protest. But as the transition to democratic rule proceeds, voluntary organisations will often seek to exert a positive influence on government policies. They will also seek some form of partnership with agencies of the state;
- *Formulating new frameworks supportive of civil society.* Direct and indirect participation of voluntary organisations in the process in which key features of the new constitutional,

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[35] The most prominent of these arguments is Putnam's *Making Democracy Work.*
[36] Hadenius, Axel and Fredrik Uggla. 1995. *Making Civil Society Work. Promoting Democratic Development; What Can States and Donors Do.* Uppsala: Department of Government Uppsala University, p. 4

legislative, and administrative frameworks affecting their own operations are being determined. For example, participation in debates leading to new constitutions with guarantees for freedom of association and freedom of speech; construction of laws and administrative regulations at different levels within the state, under which voluntary organisations are entitled to operate (taxation, sources of funding, access to information from government, having a voice in administrative decision-making).

- *Organising activities related to democracy.* These can be public educational campaigns related to elections, election monitoring operations.

- *Setting democratic standards.* Voluntary organisations provide a reservoir of talent and as well as set standards to develop new ranks of leadership. They also develop, in their own internal decision-making and employment practices, a set of standards with regard, e.g., to transparency of decision-making, accountability, gender equality, and minority involvement that can serve as exemplars for governments to follow.[37]

2.3 Theoretical Background to the Study

The theoretical considerations on two various concepts of democracy are fundamental for this study. The narrow concept presents the idea of democracy in its minimalist sense, only formal institutions being considered. This concept however gives a detailed and specified description of a democratic state model, and its components such as democratic representation, democratic participation, and basic civil rights. The broad concept gives a more extensive understanding of the idea, widening it to include more abstract notions of social and economic justice.

Civil society obviously plays a crucial role in the democratisation by fulfilling a number of functions. Special roles are ascribed to the civil society organisations during the transition period, which Belarus undergoes at the moment.

All these theoretical considerations underlie this study and are used to analyse the empirical material and to draw the conclusions.

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[37]Carmichael, William D.1993."The Particular Missions and Roles of Voluntary Organisations in Periods of Transition from Authoritarian to Democratic Policies" in Ann McKinstry Micou and Birgit Lindsnaes (eds.) *The Role of Voluntary Organisations in Emerging Democracies.* Copenhagen: The Danish Centre for Human Rights, pp. 19-21

III. QUALITATIVE METHOD

While exploring the partnership between two agents, it is essential to give the study an objective, two-side perspective. It is also crucial to have a complete picture of their interaction-process, which is impossible without "giving the floor" to both parties. For this reason I have the field research has been carried out both in Belarus and in Sweden.

For this study I have chosen a qualitative approach. This choice is based on a number of reasons. According to John W. Creswell, s*ocially constructed knowledge claim* lies at the core of the qualitative approach, the major assumptions of which hold that individuals seek understanding of the world through developing subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed towards certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas[38]. Partnership of Belarusian and Swedish NGOs is first of all an interaction of people with different backgrounds and experiences. Their views and ideas shape the goals of the joint projects, the ways they are to be achieved, the communication between the partners, etc. The qualitative approach gives a researcher an opportunity to explore as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation or process being studied, which has made it possible for me to get a better understanding of the research problem.

I have made use of the following characteristics of qualitative research[39]:

- *Qualitative research takes place in the natural world.* Most of the time devoted to the data collection has been spent meeting people and interviewing them in their offices, i.e. places that are "natural" to the respondents;

-*Qualitative research uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic*. In my study, I have used two basically different in their nature techniques of collecting the data: in-depth interviews and document analysis. While interviewing presupposes close interaction with the participants, document analysis is about working with written sources;

- *Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured.* Although I followed a certain plan in my study, it was kept flexible and made it possible to do methodological modifications in the course of my work on the research.

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[38]Creswell, John W. 2000. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, p. 8

[39]The list of characteristics is taken from Marshall, Catherine and Gretchen B. Rossman. 1999. *Designing Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, p. 3

As it has already been mentioned, the following procedures will be used to collect qualitative data: *document analysis* and *in-depth interviews*. Further, I will describe in detail how I will make use of them.

3.1 Document Analysis

The history and context surrounding a specific setting come, in part, from reviewing documents. This is an unobtrusive method, rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting.[40] Various types of documents can provide a researcher with a lot of valuable information.

The choice of the documents for the analysis is based on their importance for the partnership programme under study. The following major documents that create a framework for the Belarusian-Swedish NGOs cooperation have been :

- Swedish government's proposition on *Swedish Developmental Aid to Central and Eastern Europe;*
- Resolution of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affaires. *Country strategy for development cooperation. Belarus. January 1, 2002 – December 31, 2004;*
- *Guidelines for Sida's support to development programmes of Swedish NGOs.*

While analysing these documents I have not intended to search for what democracy actually is to the minds of their authors as representatives of the state power, because this would require a much deeper analysis of many more than these few documents regulating the Belarusian-Swedish NGO partnership. Nevertheless, the papers presented a valuable source of information on the role cooperation is supposed to play in the democratisation of Belarus.

It can be presumed that if the Swedish government has opted to channel its developmental aid to Belarus through the civil society organisations, there are certain expectations that rest on the NGOs. In other words, there are certain functions that Belarusian NGOs are to play with the assistance of their Swedish counterparts in the democratisation of Belarus. These documents, thus, present a valuable source of information in this respect. The results of the analysis have later been compared with the opinions of the interviewees on how they view their role in the democratisation of Belarus.

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[40] Catherine Marshall, and Gretchen B. Rossman. 1999. *Designing Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, p. 116

3.2 In-depth Interviewing.

Undoubtedly, it is possible to make your research by sitting comfortably at home and studying the books, official statements, evaluation reports, previous studies, etc., - everything that is related to your subject, since the written sources present a lot of valuable information. However, if one to get a grip of all the complexity of the actual state of affairs, one also has to discuss the issue with the people involved, ask them questions and be receptive to any answers.

Kahn and Cannel describe interviewing as a "conversation with a purpose"[41]. Thus, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal questionnaires with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participants' views, but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses. This corresponds to an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it.[42]

I have chosen this method because it allows me to get deep into the subjects' thinking about democracy, and to uncover how they think the work of NGOs in general and their organisations in particular can impact on the democratisation of Belarus. I interviewed this way persons coordinating partnership projects of the pairs of Swedish and Belarusian NGOs, as well as persons who are responsible for the whole partnership programme both in Belarus and Sweden.

To choose the subjects for the interviews, I have drawn a representative sample of eight Belarusian NGOs along the following lines:

- capital/countryside;
- different fields of work (social NGOs/ educational NGOs/ ecological NGOs/Human Rights advocacy, and political NGOs/trade unions/ sport clubs/youth NGOs);
- pro-democratic/neutral NGOs[43].

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[41] As quoted in Marshall, Catherine and Gretchen B. Rossman. 1999. *Designing Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, p. 108

[42] Marshall, Catherine and Gretchen B. Rossman. 1999. *Designing Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, p. 108

[43] Unlike neutral NGOs, whose activity mostly has a social character, pro-democratic organisations state democratisation and human rights advocacy as primary goals of their activity.

To draw the sample, I have counted the number of organisations representing each criteria and percentage out of total number of 32 organisations currently running partnership projects within the framework of the Belarus programme of Forum Syd. After that, I counted the number of organisations that would represent the criteria in a sample of 8 (see Table 1). The Swedish partners of the Belarusian NGOs, which are included into the sample, have automatically become the subjects for interviewing.

Table 1. The Belarusian NGOs running partnership projects with the Swedish counterparts, their percentage along the sampling lines and number as represented in the eventual sample.

Belarusian NGO	capital/	outside capital	neutral/	pro-democratic	sphere of activity*						
					SOC	EDU	ECO	HR/pol	TU	SP	Y
Roditel'skij Dom (Parents Home), Minsk	x		x		x						
Modem, Hrodna		x	x			x					
Republic Against Drugs, Minsk	x		x		x						
Fialta, Minsk	x		x			x					
Inernational Social Aid, Minsk	x		x		x						
YWCA, Minsk	x		x		x						
YMCA, Lida		x	x								x
Belarusian Union of Farmers, Minsk	x		x						x		
Young Front, Minsk	x			x				x			
RADA, Minsk	x		x								x
Radiotechnika, Minsk	x		x						x		
EcoLine, Turau		x	x				x				
BelARTI, Minsk	x		x		x						
Associacija invalidov koljasochnikov, Minsk	x		x		x						
Bats'kauschyna (Motherland), Minsk	x		x			x					
Jana, Minsk	x		x		x						
Centre for social support, Minsk	x		x		x						
Phoenix, Minsk	x		x		x						
Maladaja Gramada, Minsk	x			x				x			
Grajdanskoje Obrazovanije (Civic Education), Minsk	x			x		x					
Centre "POST", Minsk	x			x		x					
Community Development Projects, Gomel		x	x			x					
Vjasna (Spring), Minsk	x			x				x			
Belarusian Frisbee Club, Minsk	x		x				x			x	
Belarus Automobile and Agricultural Machinery Workers Union, Minsk	x		x						x		
Belarusian Pen-Club, Minsk	x			x		x					

Organisation											
Children of Chernobyl, Gomel		x	x		x						
Civil Forum, Minsk	x			x				x			
APB-Birdlife Belarus, Hrodna		x	x				x				
New Faces, Minsk	x			x							x
Church HVE, Lepel		x	x		x						
Church Sv. Serafima Sorovskogo, Minsk	x		x		x						
TOTAL (absolute number)	25	7	24	8	11	8	2	4	3	1	3
Per cent	78	22	75	25	35,2	22	6,2	12,5	9,3	3	9,3
Number in sample (out of 8)	6	2	6	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1

* The following abbreviations stand for: SOC –social; EDU – education, science; ECO – ecological; HR/pol – Human Rights, political; TU –trade union; SP – sports; Y - youth

Since the organisations from a sample had to meet several criteria, there were not so many cases, where I had to choose between a few organisations. In such cases, I took the Swedish partner in consideration. I tried to exclude the Belarusian organisations whose Swedish partners are hard to reach (e.g. their office is not in Stockholm) due to the limited research time and resources.

The final sample (see Table 2) includes eight persons responsible for the partnership project implementation from each side and one person responsible for the whole programme both in Belarus and in Sweden, i.e. total number of 18 qualitative interviews have been conducted.

Table 2. Sample (pairs)

Belarusian partner	**Swedish partner**
Forum Syd representative Belarus *Vlad Velichko*	Forum Syd *Åsa Berglund*
Belarus YMCA *Olga Sviderskaja*	KFUK-KFUM Riksförbundet *Anita Andersson*
Phoenix *Valerij Tserljukevich*	Social Ekonomi i Roslagen *Bosse Blideman*
Young Front *Siarzhuk Lisichonak*	Kristdemokratiska Ungdomsförbundet *Robert Lisborg*
Belarusian Frisbee Club *Andrej Antanovich and Tanja Shametko*	Svenska Frisbee Förbundet *Paul Eriksson*
Belarusian PEN Centre *Anna Gerasimova*	Svenska PEN-klubben *Håkan Josephson*
Belarusian Union of Farmers *Konstantin Yermolenko*	Kooperation Utan Granser *Björn Jönsson*
APB-Birdlife Belarus *Dzmitri Vincheuski*	Svenska Ornitologiska Förening *Lennart Carlsson*
Associacija invalidov koljasochnikov *Sergej Drozdovskij*	Rekryteringsgruppen för aktiv rehabilitering *Per Jamesson*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, i.e. there were a sequence of themes to be covered, and a number of suggested questions; yet, at the same time there was openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given by the subjects.[44] Some questions could be omitted, and additional questions were added during the interviewing.

The interviews have been conducted in English (with Swedish interviewees), Russian and Belarusian (with Belarusian interviewees) languages. The voce recorder was used not to upset the conversational flow.

The texts of the interviews have then been transcribed and analysed. I have used *meaning categorization* as a method of analysis[45]. This implies that I have divided the interview texts into categories that roughly correspond to themes covered during the conversations. Some categories, such as *elections*, *democratic citizenship,* etc. are taken from the theory, however some additional categories arose during the interviews. Afterwards I filled in the table with the quotes from the interviews or summaries of the answers that correspond to the categories. This method allowed me to easily compare the information received from both sides. The categories have later been developed into corresponding sections of the empirical part of my thesis.

In the present conditions in Belarus, when the state is keeping a close control of all the non-state initiated activities, the discussion concerned with the issues of democracy could have affected my informants. Although almost all the participant agreed to have their names mentioned in the work, for ethical reasons I have not used the names of the participants within the body of my work, except for the list of interviewees in the Sources chapter. The names were coded; the code includes a letter B or S (which stands for a Belarusian and a Swedish participant respectively), and an ordinal number from 1 to 9 (according to the number of participants from each side).

3.3 Limitations and Challenges to the Study

The theoretical basis for the study could have been more fruitful in case the considerations of the East European authors on the definition of democracy and civil society functioning were regarded. This would have given me an opportunity to presume which eventual differences in the presentations of the partners that could have been expected. However, the concept of democracy itself is a West European one, and there were not so many East Europeans, at least not well-

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[44] Kvale, Steinar. 1996. *InterViews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, p. 124
[45] Ibid., p. 192

known ones, who covered this issue in their works. For this reason, I opted to conduct my study within this limited framework.

Some criticism is needed regarding the choice of the sources for the document analysis. By analysing the government propositions on the developmental aid and guidelines for their implementation, I have only presented the Swedish point of view. The Belarusian perspective could have been examined through the analysis of the participant organisations' statutes. However, for the reason of obligatory registration of the statutes in the state organs, they generally do not contain any information on the organisation's standpoint on democracy, even if it has an aim to promote the democratisation of Belarus.

Concerning the sampling for the interviews, I have to accept that representatives of a certain amount of organisations did not have a chance to get into the sample. The cooperation between Belarusian and Swedish organisations is not limited to the Forum Syd Belarusian programme, on which I based my study. Some of them are funded through other foundations (e.g. The Swedish Mission Council, The Olof Palmes International Centre, etc.) as well as partnership projects are run by the organisations independently. However, that would be too an ambitious endeavour to embrace all of them within the scope of an MA thesis.

When it comes to the interviews themselves, one of the most serious shortcomings is that has to be accepted is that interviews with the Swedish correspondents were conducted in English, which presented a certain difficulty both for me and for the respondents, who with the exception of one interviewee do not have English as a mother tongue. To avoid eventual misinterpretations, all the interviewees had received the draft of the thesis before the final version was submitted, and l their comments were taken into consideration.

The biggest challenge that I faced during conducting the research part of the thesis was to be objective. I have been involved in a Belarusian-Swedish NGO partnership project myself, which inevitably created my personal point of view on the subject. This bias was really hard to address, though I did my best to avoid any subjectivity. This personal experience, however, can also be regarded as something positive, since it provided me with an "inside perspective" of the subject as well as made the contacts with the interviewees easer.

IV. BACKGROUND FOR THE RESEARCH

4.1 Belarusian NGOs vs. State: Past and Present

Civil society in Belarus does not have a long history. It was not before 1980s, that informal student movements were formed in Belarus, primarily to promote cultural objectives. Due to the opening of a bigger space for social activity outside the state realm during the times of *perestroyka*, NGOs in Belarus grew in number and in their activity, though still focusing primarily on cultural, educational, or ecological issues. In the late 1980s, with the revelation of the damage caused by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the uncovering of the Kurapaty killings of the 1930s, even more people were drawn to public actions and organisations.[46] The state persecuted informal organisations, which, however, did not lead to the halting of their activities. In 1988, their aggregate membership reached as many as 46 thousand people and 566 organisations operating in Minsk alone[47].

With independence in 1991, the actual establishment of a "third sector" in Belarus began, and NGOs became legally registered entities. The goals of NGOs evolved to include the promotion of democracy, a market economy, and the rule of law. [48] At that time, the conditions for the NGOs operating were quite favourable in a sense that the Belarusian authorities did not exert real pressure on political and non-political organisations, their total number reaching 1100[49]. With the political events of 1996, particularly the highly questionable referendum in November, which marked a start of consolidation of an authoritarian regime, NGOs in Belarus became even more involved in political affairs as the legitimacy of the ruling government came into question. This, however, led to the confrontation from the side of the state, and the logic of the Belarussian regime demanded that dissident thinking is suppressed and not exhibited.

As of October 2004, there were 235 international, 722 national and 1296 local NGOs registered by the Ministry of Justice.[50] However, even though the organisations have grown substantially in numbers, the conditions in which they exist have not become better, quite the opposite. With the regime strengthening its grip on the society, the space for the NGOs operating is being limited

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[46] Conkievich, Elaine M. 2002. "The NGO Approach: Possibilities for Positive Engagement in Belarus" in *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West* by Balamaceda, Margarita et al (eds.), Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p.410-411

[47] Protko, Tatiana. 1999. *Problems of the Formation of a Civil Society in Belarus (1995-1999)* in "Analytic Bulletin of Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies", March 1999, Issue 1(11). Retrieved from http://www.internews.ru/iiseps/11/5.html, quoted 01-10-2002

[48] Conkievich, Elaine M. 2002. "The NGO Approach: Possibilities for Positive Engagement in Belarus" in *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West* by Balamaceda, Margarita et al (eds.), Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p.410-411

[49] Protko, Tatiana. 1999. *Problems of the Formation of a Civil Society in Belarus (1995-1999)* in "Analytic Bulletin of Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies", March 1999, Issue 1(11). Retrieved from http://www.internews.ru/iiseps/11/5.html, quoted 01-10-2002

[50] www.ngo.by

with every coming month. A number of Presidential Decrees were issued "for the purpose of regulation of activity … and for improvement of control over it"[51], which subject the NGOs to the total control from the state in regards to their activities, finances, etc as argued by Elaine Conkievich (2002). However, legislation does not seem to be enough to eliminate any form of activism in Belarus. Another threat to NGOs from the side of the state is the administrative harassment in the form of denial of, or excessive delay in, registration, sudden and unexpected rent increases, tax audits, and denial of facilities for the activities or permits for public meetings and demonstrations[52].

Evidently, Belarusian civil society does not enjoy high appraisal, both locally and internationally, there is even en opinion that "Belarus has the least developed civil society in Europe"[53]. However, at the present moment, support to the NGOs is seen by the international actors as the only way to enforce the democratisation process in Belarus.

4.2 Swedish Democracy Assistance to Belarus

Swedish development cooperation has a long history and has its roots in popular movements, associations, societies and organisations. The first aid projects were started by missionaries in Africa in 1860s. This tradition has found continuation in the establishment of the Swedish government's development assistance programmes some 100 years later, popular movements and organisations being the driving force behind it.[54] During all these years, a substantial body of knowledge and expertise of working through public organisations have been accumulated. It is not, therefore, by chance, that after the Belarusian constitutional referendum of November 1996, when the decision has been taken to confine Sweden's development cooperation to humanitarian assistance and measures in support of democratisation, Belarusian NGOs were chosen to channel the assistance[55].

During the period 1994-2001, funding amounted to 80 million SEK, directed primarily at measures to encourage the development of a pluralist society, human rights, and civil society as a whole. Since 1997, the Swedish Government has sought to raise the interest among Swedish

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[51] Conkievich, Elaine M. 2002. "The NGO Approach: Possibilities for Positive Engagement in Belarus" in *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West* by M. Balamaceda et al (eds.), Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p.414
[52] Ibid.
[53] Lenzi, Mark. 2002. "Lost Civilization: The Thorough Repression of Civil Society in Belarus" in *Democratizacitya,* 10(3), p.401
[54] *Guidelines for Sida's support to development programmes of Swedish NGOs.* April 1998.SEKA: Stockholm, p.5
[55] *Country strategy for development cooperation. Belarus. January 1, 2002 – December 31, 2004.* Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for Central and Eastern Europe, 17 October, 2002. Sweden, p 3

organisations and institutions for Belarus.[56] A special Belarussian programme was initiated under the administration of Forum Syd, an umbrella organisation for the Swedish NGOs. Due to the favourable conditions set by Sida and efforts of the Forum Syd, a big amount of Swedish NGOs started partnership projects with Belarusian NGOs within different areas, including youth activities, education, assistance to the disabled people, and environment. Moreover, several hundreds of Belarusian journalists have been educated on the free media functioning in a democratic society through cooperation with a Belarusian independent journalist association.[57]

At the present moment, as many as 46 Belarusian-Swedish NGO projects are run. Despite the fact that Sida has taken a decision to change the conditions for cooperation with Belarus, which implies that the Swedish NGOs have to submit 20% of the project costs (before that Sida's covered 100% of the budget), there is continuous interest from the side of the Swedish NGOs to continue partnerships and to start new projects.

V. DEMOCRACY AS SEEN FROM DIFFERENT SHORES. RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the results of my endeavour to get as many various ideas as possible on the subject matter of this thesis.

Talking about such a complicated matter as democracy, appeared to be not an easy pursuit, and not so much because the concept is so complex. Both Belarusian and Swedish respondents experienced some difficulties during the discussion, though for different reasons.

Some of the Swedish interviewees pointed out that it is not easy for them to discuss democracy, because this is something that is so obvious, taken for granted to such an extent, that it is even difficult to single it out:

> *It's very tough for someone who enjoyed democracy…throughout your whole life to tell somebody else who hasn't had that fortune, haven't developed fortune experiencing democracy, how to define it[58].*

This tendency can be quite easily understood taking into account that Sweden is considered to be a country with deeply-rooted democratic culture, where the notion of democracy is not learned from the books, but rather is experienced since the early childhood.

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[56] Ibid., p. 3
[57] *Conditions for Sida Activity in Belarus,* retrieved from ttp://www.sida.se/Sida/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=240&a=29852, quoted September 22, 2004
[58] S-5

When it comes to the Belarusian participants, the situation was different. Even if we discussed democracy from the theoretical perspective, rather than political situation specifically in Belarus, the feeling of tension was not rare during the discussions. One of the natural explanations that one can think of is that this tension could arise out of fear of some negative consequences in case a state official has an access to the information provided by the interviewees. However, I would not make such a hasty conclusion, since only an insignificant part of the Belarusian interviewees refused to have their names mentioned in the thesis. I would assume that it is simply an unusual topic to discuss, and generally people do not feel comfortable with discussing something that they do not know very well.

The participants of my research have expressed a whole spectrum of ideas and thoughts on what democracy is to them. Evidently, to outline some vision of democracy and merely label it as a Swedish or a Belarusian way of thinking would be oversimplifying. There is certainly a wide range of various opinions among the representatives of one side, as well as similar ideas are not rare among interviewees from different sides. Nevertheless, it is still possible to outline some tendencies in the way both sides imagine the democratic society.

5.1 General Understanding of Democracy

As already discussed in the theory part, the concept of democracy itself is extremely vague and can be discussed on different levels of society, various spheres of life, and can have various manifestations in reality. There are also different theoretic approaches to the concept of democracy. Previously, I have discussed two various concepts, a narrow and a broad ones. However, the complexity of life is impossible to fit into the theory, and it is natural that the ideas of the participants are rather symbiosis than clear thinking within this or that concept.

One of the first questions that I asked after an introductory discussion was: What do you think democracy is? This general question, I expected, would provide me with spontaneous answers and allow me to see in which way a person perceives the matter of discussion and which of the approaches he/she opts for.

The analysis shows that basically there is no difference between the two sides in the choice of the approach. The majority of both Belarusians and Swedish were speaking in terms of narrow concept, which presupposes that they see democracy in its minimalist sense, considering it essentially as procedural manifestations. Only 11% Belarusian and 22% of Swedish participants

mentioned some criteria of broad understanding of democracy, such as social, economic, or political equality.

However, even if the considerations of the interviewees from both sides can be considered within the same approach, still some tendencies can be traced according to which component of the narrow concept is mentioned most often.

45% of both Belarusian and Swedish respondents mentioned various forms of citizens' *political participation*, including membership in political parties or civil society organisations as a criterion of a well-functioning democracy. Thus, the existence itself of political and civil society, and people's activism are important. What Belarusians strongly emphasised compared to the Swedish participants (twice as many Belarusians as there were Swedish mentioned it), are *civil rights and freedoms* as a necessary condition for democracy, freedom of choice being mentioned most often. Peculiarly enough, none of the Belarussian and at the same time 45% of the Swedish respondents made mention of the *representative* nature of democracy. In other words, they see the mechanism of electing people to various decision-making organs as a basis for democratic rule.

What distinguished the participants was also the level of society that the participants choose to cover the topic of discussion. While sharing their ideas about democracy, Swedish partners tend to discuss it on both state and organisational level, which presupposes that democratic processes within their own organisation are not less important than those within the state system. Most often they spoke about democratic decision-making in the organisation, where *every member has an opportunity to influence the course of the organisation*[59], the leaders are chosen through regular elections, they are transparent in their work, and people are in general free to join any association they like.

Only a few Belarusians spoke about democracy on the organisation level. The majority of them described democratic rule in a state. Most often they started their description with the words – *democracy is a state government system which…*, or *democracy is a way of society arrangement which…*, thus describing what a state should be, rather than applying the concept of democracy to their everyday lives or their work in an NGO.

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[59] S-2

An opinion that was shared by the 22% of Belarusian interviewees, and was not mentioned by any of the Swedish interviewees is that the notion of a democratic system includes the state's care of the revival of the national culture and language. The citizens of such a state are also aware of their national identity and care to preserve their historic roots.

> *Democracy is support for [...] national culture, and that should be a real support, and not to leave it to develop by itself.[60]*

What I found interesting in the Swedish discussions, is that some of the interviewees not only see democracy as an inalienable part of their life, but also perceive it as something inherent to the human nature, so that we all share the same meaning of democracy.

> *We feel the same, to be free means actually the same to me as it does to a person in Belarus, or in Ghana, or in China. So, on the most basic, on the most profound [level] word democracy means actually the same for all the people, and then forms and how the representation..., that can of course differ, but the deep sense of the word is actually the same[61].*

I have so far discussed the participants' general preferences in terms of approach and level of discussion as well as some particular features of their representations. Both Belarusians and Swedes tend to discuss democracy within the narrow approach, though there is tendency among Swedes to move their discussions to a broader area of understanding. There is also tendency among Swedes to discuss democracy at both organisational and state level, while Belarusians keep their discussions at the state level. What can be regarded as a distinguishing feature of the Swedish discussions was viewing democracy as possessing universal value and being inherent to the human nature. Belarusians though spoke about the revival of the national culture as an important part of the democratic processes.

Detailed analysis of the participants understanding of the three main components of the narrow approach as well as more detailed discussion of the choice between the two approaches will be considered in the separate sections further in this work.

5.2 The Role of Elections

The electoral process is a manifestation of the idea of political representation, which stands in the core of any democratic system. All the interviewees from both sides agreed that elections is an essential part of democracy, though there are some differences in the way partners perceive them and the role ascribed to them in a democratic process.

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[60] B-4
[61] S-9

As it has already been discussed in the previous chapter, the Swedish interviewees tend to talk about democratic procedures both on the state level and in their NGO, and elections are no exception. Thus, 44 % of the Swedish interviewees mentioned elections to the Parliament and the Board of their own organisation simultaneously. In case of the Belarusian side, only 11% of the interviewees spoke of the elections in his/her own organisation. This again reveals that Swedish participants are not only concerned with the democracy procedures in the state, but also in their everyday life, participating in the process themselves.

However, it is not only the level of perception that is different, there was also different understanding of the role of the elections. The Swedish interviewees generally emphasise the importance of elections as a major mechanism of representative democracy, as a method of voting at people that one believes will defend their interests and make effective decisions. At the same time, the importance of free flow and availability of information was mentioned quite often as a necessary attribute of the electoral process.

> *You have to elect your representatives, but before electing representatives you also have to get the information on what they will decide[62].*

In case of Belarusians, the meaning of elections was often seen rather as a possibility to make some kind of an abstract choice rather than electing a representative to a ruling organ.

Unlike with Belarusians, it was quite typical for the Swedish representatives to remark that elections are important because they make leaders accountable in front of the people. From their point of view, this mechanism creates a possibility to change the leadership in case their work is not satisfactory, or is strongly criticized by the electorate. For this reason, the leaders have to really care about their work to meet the needs of those who elected them. In general, the issue of leadership received much attention during the interviews, and will be discussed later in a separate section.

Even if agreed with the importance of the elections theoretically, 56 % of the Belarusians still referred, directly or indirectly, to the present political situation in Belarus, and made a reservation that elections only have any value in case they meet certain standards.

> *Elections are an opinion of the majority of people, but only if the elections are good […] if the elections are real, and you know that they are not rigged[63].*

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[62] S-3
[63] B-6

Some of the interviewees even separated the notion "election" from "voting" [64] in a sense that people can participate in a voting, but cannot actually affect the decision or elect anybody.

> *Voting is what we have now, there is no choice actually [...] as Stalin said, the one who is counting is important rather the one who is voting[65].*

As we can see, both Belarusians and Swedes refer to their everyday experiences in their considerations about elections and the current political situation in their countries is of great significance for that. While the Swedish interviewees regard elections as an important mechanism of the representative democracy both at a state level and in their own NGOs, Belarusians tend to consider elections as a possibility for some abstract choice and doubt the value of the elections in their own country.

5.3 Democratic Citizenship

While discussing the issue of democratic citizenship, I wanted to know which characteristics the respondents ascribe to a citizen of a democratic state. In this respect, there were trends that the Belarusians and the Swedes shared, as well as quite diverse opinions were expressed.

According to Shklar, a democratic citizen participates actively in the political life of his/her own country both locally and nationally[66]. There is a number of ways to do that through various kinds of activities. The following forms of possible participation of a citizen in the political life of his/her country were mentioned by both Belarusian and Swedish respondents:

- voting in elections (though predominantly Swedish);
- active membership in NGOs and other forms of collective action;
- various forms of community action, such as those concerned with housing, transport, schooling, etc.

Theoretically, the notion of democratic citizenship can be regarded as structured from several constituents. We can distinguish between *individual-based* and *group-based* forces of citizens' activism, as well as each of these traits has an *attitude* and a *resource* dimension. Among the *individual-based forces*, a developed political interest, a desire to be involved and to influence the decisions can be named, i.e. all the qualities related to the active political attitudes that people

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[64] "Golosovanije" and "vybory" in the Russian language.
[65] B-1
[66] Shklar, Judith in Hadenius, Axel. 2001. *Institutions and Democratic Citizenship.* New York: Oxford University Press, p. 17

possess as individuals. However, possessing these qualities is not enough, and that is why we are talking also about a *resource* dimension. A person should have free access to the information, have free time to spend on political activities as well as economic resources to contribute to these activities.

As the title suggests, the *group-based* forces are not centered on private individuals, but rather on relations between them. Feelings of trust and affinity between people, an experience of identification with a larger whole, and solidarity with a unit of people we belong to can be mentioned in this regard. *Resource* dimension in this case concerns what real possibilities exist in a given state for coordinated and collective action.

Both Swedish and Belarusian respondents mentioned such individual-based attitudes of a democratic citizen as being politically active, keeping himself/herself informed on important issues concerning their country, open-mindedness, and developed political interest.

Nevertheless, some specific Belarusian and Swedish tendencies can be distinguished. Such quality as *responsibility* for his/her own life, family, community, or country was mentioned by 33% of the Belarusians, whereas none of the Swedish mentioned it during the discussion.

> *In an authoritarian state, a citizen is not responsible for anything, because he/she cannot actually change anything, in contrast to that, a democratic citizen has a certain political standing and defends it[67].*

While discussing this point, Belarusian interviewees regarded a democratic citizen as some kind of an active unit as opposed to a passive state, which is not interested in the well-being of its citizens.

> *Democratic citizen ... not waiting that the state or local authorities will make something for him, but rather is taking action herself[68].*

Another 22% of the Belarusian interviewees spoke of a democratic citizen as a *law-abiding* individual. According to their opinion, a democratic state is characterized by the rule of law, and consequently, the citizens have to follow the laws of their country.

> *First of all, he [a democratic citizen] has to follow the law, to live according to the laws of his country […] all his rights and responsibilities should be mentioned in the Constitution. […] From one side, a person has a freedom, but if he breaks the law, he cannot be called a citizen any longer.[69]*

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[67] B-2
[68] B-1
[69] B-6

An opinion that was characteristic only to the Swedish respondents and was expressed by the 22% of them is that a democratic citizen is *antiracist* and *internationally active.*

> *...being democratic, you will fight inequality whenever they show up [...], at lease vote for the people in your country that are supporting the democratic movements internationally.[70]*

When speaking about the *group-based* forces, both Belarusian and Swedish respondents mentioned some of them, though in a slightly different way. As many as 45% of the Belarusian interviewees referred to a democratic citizen as a person who is *taking other peoples' interests into consideration, communicate actively with the neighbours, people in the local community*, etc. One of the interviewees mentioned such quality as *social competence,* which is

> *a person's skill to be a member of a larger society in all the possible senses - political, social, ecological, communicative, etc. I.e. this is a full-fledged person, who is able to be a member of a collective, to take decisions, to communicate and to analyse information.[71]*

Another trait of a democratic citizen that can be regarded within the concept of *group-based* forces, and which was mentioned by the 22% of the Belarusian respondents is *national identification.* To their mind, only a person who identifies himself/herself with a larger nation can be called a citizen.

For the Swedish participants' part, the *group-based* forces take a more structuralised form, rather than abstract qualities. Thus, 33% of the respondents mentioned the importance of participating in the various organisations and local communities to take a collective action for the common good.

When it comes to the *attitude/recourse* dimensions, there were twice as many Swedish as there were Belarusians who spoke about both *individual-* and *group-based* forces from a resource perspective, i.e. not only the individual traits, but also a possibilities provided by the state were seen as necessary. Free access to the information, state's respect for human rights, and openness of a state system were mentioned in this respect.

> *Citizens, they have, specially... that the political system is open so every citizen could [...] in every way know what the politicians are discussing, what decisions they are taking or ... and also that they could if they want change or effect political system in some way, they can do that.[72]*

To sum up, the common tendency among the Belarusian and Swedish interviewees is to associate democratic citizenship with such forms of political participation as voting, being active in an NGO and in a community. Such *individual* traits as political activism, open-mindedness,

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[70] S-9
[71] B-5
[72] S-4

and developed political interest have also been mentioned by the representatives of both sides. However, such qualities as *national identification* and *being law-abiding* were typical only for the Belarusians, whereas *antiracism* and *international activism were* characteristic for the Swedish respondents vision of a democratic citizen. Much more Swedish than Belarusians regard *resource* dimension in addition to simply mentioning the personal characteristics.

5.4 Civil Rights in a Democratic State

According to Robert Dahl, to qualify for a democracy, a state should guarantee its citizens the following civil rights:

1. freedom of expression, including criticism of and opposition to the leaders and party in office;
2. free access to information;
3. freedom of association;
4. right to vote.

As it would be logical to presume, the importance of the civil rights for a well-functioning democracy is not doubted by any of the participants. Both sides spoke of all the rights mentioned above as well as other civil rights that they deemed were important for a democratic state. Some specific traits, characteristic for both sides, however, can be traced.

What was specific about the Belarusians' responses is that many of them referred to various documents stating their rights, rather than naming the rights themselves. Thus, 44% of the respondents mentioned the UN Declaration of the Human Rights as the basis for the democratic rule, compared to 22% among the Swedish respondents). Another 22% of the Belarussian participants spoke of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, as a document containing the rights that a state should guarantee to its citizens, which is quite a peculiar tendency taking into consideration that the Constitution of 1996, which is in force now, is recognized as illegitimate by the international community.

There was equal number of participants from both sides who mentioned the *freedom of expression*, including the freedom to openly express your opinion and be in opposition to the ruling party or leaders.

> And also I think you have to respect opposition [...] it is healthy to have opposition. You have someone who is in power, and you have to be sure that there are others to say," No, we would like to change" at any time. [...] And also to express your opinion, and not being jailed for that.[73]

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[73] S 7

However, the opinions on the right to *free access to information* were not that unanimous. There were twice as many Swedish as Belarusians who mentioned it.

Another difference can be traced if we look at the respondents' attitude to voting. In difference to 11% of the Belarusian respondents, as many as 56% of the Swedish mentioned the right to vote as one of the most important rights of a democratic citizen. If we recall the discussion on the significance of elections, that would seem natural that Belarusians do not consider a right to vote as an important one if they doubt the quality of the elections as such in their country.

To summarise, both sides agree with the significance of the civil rights for a democratic state, though some different traits can be traced. The same number of respondents mentioned the freedom of expression, though there were more Swedish who stressed the importance of the free access to information to form one's opinion. The right to vote was predominantly mentioned by the Swedish respondents. Belarusians in their turn more often referred to such statements as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of their country.

5.5 Leadership

The issue of leadership in a democratic system was raised by 45% of the Swedish respondents and 11% of the Belarusians during the discussion, and, therefore, deserves to be mentioned in this work separately. A few aspects can be singled out in this respect.

Firstly, the problem of the leadership irremovability in the Belarusian NGOs was touched by 33% of the Swedish and 11% of the Belarusian respondents. An opinion exists, that in the majority of Belarusian organisations, a person who once founded an NGO, becomes leader for many years. It is not rare that even if an organisation holds regular elections, it is the same person who is chosen all the time.

> *[Democracy is] being able to change leadership when it's needed [...], and being humble in the leadership, not being the ruler, which is the case I think in all these countries. If you are elected chairman, then you are the boss. And then you can forget about your members, because then you are ruling, it's just your ideas that counts. [...]He [the boss] never resigns, he will die, even if he has no development force left, he will die with this position[74].*

 The respondents even suggested possible explanations for this phenomenon. One of them is that in the current situation in Belarus, there are not so many possibilities to realize one's own full potential. The state sector does not allow dissidence from the created rules and mechanisms, the usage of the new methods of work is not at all welcomed. The private sector is more open in this

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[74] S-7

sense, but is in a shaky position since private businesses are constantly harassed by the government. Political party system, which would provide a person with a space to express himself/herself, is still underdeveloped[75]. In these circumstances, so-called MONGOs (My Own NGO) are created to implement certain personal ideas. Generally, it does take a lot of time and efforts to start a public organisation, and once having succeeded, a person does not see himself/herself in any other position in an organisation. At the same time, members themselves do not want to elect anybody else, either because they pay their due to the efforts of the leader, or simply because there is no any other person that would fit this position.[76] Another possible explanation, keeping in mind that Belarus has been a part of tsarist Russia and then Soviet Union, is that there is simply no tradition to change leaders[77].

At the same time, 33% of the Swedish interviewees pointed out that accountability of the leadership is essential for a democratic system at any level, either a state or a organisational one. The free flow of information in both directions, from the leader to members and vise versa is seen as crucially important in the view of the Swedish side, while Belarusians do not even mention it.

5.6 Broad or Narrow Concept of Democracy.

I have already discussed this point shortly in the section on general understanding of democracy, now I will look at it at more detail. While discussing this question with my interviewees, I was interested if they adhere to a narrow concept of democracy limiting it to minimal criteria like regular elections, civil rights guarantees and political participation, or saw economic and social equality as an inherent part of the democratic rule in a state, thus expanding their views to a broad one. Here, again, we can trace some tendencies that are typical for the Belarusian or the Swedish side, and that are common to both.

The representatives of both Swedish and Belarusian NGOs in general agreed that a democratic state should guarantee economically some basic level of living as well as equal social opportunities in regards to education, healthcare and pensions. However, the issue of responsibility for a person's life was addressed in a different way.

Only 33% of the Swedish respondents argued that the state should not interfere into the social sphere, e.g.

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[75] B-2
[76] Ibid.
[77] B-7

> *The state should do as little as possible with people with work […]. The rest should be left for the market forces. That's democracy. State should not interfere[78].*

At the same time, as long as the state provides for the democratic tools to change the situation, such as elections, representative system, rule of law and basic civil rights, this state is to be considered democratic.

The rest were positive towards democratic state guaranteeing equality in all the spheres of life, rather than only formal mechanisms of democratic rule. Quite often, citizens' perspective was emphasized, that is the feelings of solidarity and mercy should be present in every society as well as feeling of obligation to help those in need.

> *If you see that there are people in your community that don't have enough to eat or to live a decent life, then I think the society should help in that and that is solidarity, and you pay your taxes if you have money[79].*

To distribute income so that everybody had at least equal basic standard of living has also been seen as a human way of living in a society. I believe that this vision quite corresponds the today's political situation in Sweden with social democrats being in power for more than 50 years. We can, thus, make a conclusion that there is tendency among the Swedish interviewees to consider democracy within the broader approach.

As many as 67% Belarusian respondents agreed that the state should guarantee equal starting opportunities for everybody, but after that it is up to each person's abilities or business qualities to safeguard his/her own well-being. Some of the respondents even mentioned that this can be a choice of a person to strive for more material prosperity or not.

> *If a person doesn't want to be rich, to be active in economic life, this is his choice[80].*

One of the respondents mentioned that these are the NGOs that have to take care of the social equality, because *a state can only make it worse[81].*

Thus, the ability of the state to guarantee social and economic equality is questioned, hence, there is a tendency to keep the discussion within the narrow approach

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[78] S-2
[79] S-3
[80] B-1
[81] Ibid.

This emphasis on the personal responsibility might be explained by the situation that the population has found itself during the resent 10 years. During the Soviet rule everybody was considered to be equal in all respects as well as the basic standard of living was guaranteed by the state. Every Soviet citizen had an access to free education, healthcare as well as was guaranteed social welfare. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, all these guarantees disappeared because a new state was too week to take care of its citizens. Nowadays, Belarusians do not generally trust the authorities and relay more on themselves than on the state. It is quite natural then that they still keep to their everyday life attitudes while describing an ideal democratic state.

VI. NGOS AND THEIR ROLE IN DEMOCRATISATION

In this chapter I will combine information from two sources – official documents and the interviews. First, I will look at the official point of view by examining the official statements and regulations. After that, I will compare it to what the people who are implementing these decisions into reality think.

While analysing the documents and interviews, I referred to William D. Carmichael's list of specific missions and roles ascribed to voluntary organisations during the transition from authoritarian to democratic regime[82], which are:

- *Charting new relationships with government.* As the transition to democratic rule proceeds, voluntary organisations are to exert a positive influence on government policies; they will also seek some form of partnership with agencies of a state and various state authorities;

- *Formulating new frameworks supportive of civil society.* Direct and indirect participation of voluntary organisations in the process in which key features of the new constitutional, legislative, and administrative frameworks affecting their own operations are being determined.

- *Organising activities related to democracy.* These can be public educational campaigns related to elections, election monitoring operations.

- *Setting democratic standards.* Voluntary organisations provide a reservoir of talent and as well as set standards to develop new ranks of leadership. They also develop, in their own internal decision-making and employment practices, a set of standards with regard, e.g.,

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[82]Carmichael, William D.1993."The Particular Missions and Roles of Voluntary Organisations in Periods of Transition from Authoritarian to Democratic Policies" in Ann McKinstry Micou and Birgit Lindsnaes (eds.) *The Role of Voluntary Organisations in Emerging Democracies.* Copenhagen: The Danish Centre for Human Rights, pp. 19-21

to transparency of decision-making, accountability, gender equality, and minority involvement that can serve as examples for governments to follow.

6.1 Analysis of the Documents Regulating Swedish Developmental Aid to Belarus.

The main document regulating Swedish developmental aid in the Baltic region is the government's proposition on *Swedish Developmental Aid to Central and Eastern Europe*[83]. The document assesses the current developments in the Baltic region, as well as covers Sweden's priorities in this respect and which directions the developmental aid is to take in the present circumstances.

According to the proposition, the aim of Sweden's development work in Central and Eastern Europe is "to support sustainable development, deeper integration and partnership in the Baltic region"[84]. Belarus as a part of Baltic region gets into the sphere of the Swedish interest, and it is therefore important to support the integration of the country to Europe. Though the situation in the Republic is assessed as negative and unwelcoming any kind of reforms, the Swedish government claims that "there should be readiness to broader cooperation in case the political and economic situation in Belarus changes and allows the country to get into closer relationship with the rest of Europe"[85]. However, until situation remains unchangeable, it is important to avoid the isolation of the Belarusian people. The input Sweden is to make in this respect is to broaden contacts the Belarusians have with Sweden and other European countries.

The document also elaborates which areas the Swedish government prioritises within the democracy development direction. The first area is the reformation of the legal system of the recipient countries so that it meets the international standards. Belarus, however, is not mentioned in this respect since the reforming of the legal system requires cooperation on the state level, which is close to impossible in the present circumstances. Another area is encouraging cooperation on the local and regional level to create well-functioning institutions through which the knowledge and values can be transferred. For this cooperation to be possible, broad networks of contacts has to be developed between the neighbouring countries. In case of Belarus, these contacts are to be developed through cooperation with voluntary organisations.

According to the government's proposition on *Swedish Developmental Aid to Central and Eastern Europe,* democratisation of Belarus has a high priority, and civil society is a tool.

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[83] Here and after translation is made by the author.
[84] *Europa I omvandling. Sveriges utveklingsarbete med Central och Östeuropa.* March 2002. Edita Norsdedts Tryckeri AB, Stockholm, p.8
[85] Ibid., p.11

However, this proposition is of a more general character, and outlines the main priorities in the developmental aid to a larger region of the Eastern and Central Europe. It does not for this reason elaborate on which specific missions the Swedish authorities ascribe to the NGOs particularly in Belarus.

The document which regulates the development aid specifically to Belarus, and thus can provide more specific information for the case in point is *Country strategy for development cooperation. Belarus. January 1, 2002 – December 31, 2004.* The *Strategy* again emphasises the role of the civil society organisation in the democratisation of Belarus, and further specifies on the certain objectives in this respect, which can be related to the list of missions mentioned above:

- One of the main priorities in the field of NGO cooperation is "to generate greater understanding for the culture of democracy, to seek to enhance democratic culture and democratic structures, and to encourage active participation on the part of citizens"[86], which can be seen as a mission of *setting democratic standards*. The contacts with the Swedish NGOs are supposed to provide the Belarusian counterparts with more profound knowledge on the democratic principles and mechanisms, which they will further spread in the society;
- Special emphasis is made on expanding project activities to include local authorities. Thus, the mission of *charting new relationships with government* should be accomplished through involving representatives of both NGOs and the country's public administration. The basic idea behind this provision is that "it is crucial that Belarusian civil servants also be brought into contact with the European community of values"[87]. However, it should be noted that only local and regional authorities are to be included into the project work, and not officials of higher, or national, level;
- *Strategy* elaborates also on the importance of the projects that include *activities related to democracy.* "Creation and support to the independent media", "encouragement of political dialogue at local and national level through involving more people to become politically active"[88], etc. are seen as an important part of the cooperation.

The aforementioned documents present the Swedish government's priorities in respect to Belarus and the NGOs cooperation. However, it is important to see how their provisions are executed

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[86] *Country strategy for development cooperation. Belarus. January 1, 2002 – December 31, 2004.* Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for Central and Eastern Europe, 17 October, 2002. Sweden, p 8
[87] *Country strategy for development cooperation. Belarus. January 1, 2002 – December 31, 2004.* Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for Central and Eastern Europe, 17 October, 2002. Sweden, p 6
[88] Ibid.

further. The main executive organ that is responsible for the implementing of the Government decisions concerning developmental aid is Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). The main instrument regulating Sida activities in the sphere of development cooperation is *Guidelines for Sida's support to development programmes of Swedish* NGOs approved in April 1998.

Though the *Guidelines* emphasize the fundamental importance of building up a vigorous civil society in the developing countries, the document does not speculate why it is so crucial, and which specific functions it is to play. However, if we look at the priorities for the projects listed in *Conditions for Sida Activity in Belarus* on Sida's website, we can see that the priorities emphasized in the two aforementioned documents are clearly reflected in the Sida's policy:

a. The partnership projects dependent on the central ministries or authorities, should be avoided. However, what concerns the projects of system-opening character, it can even be advisable to have contact to local and regional authorities, including universities and state-owned companies, while implementing the projects. In this way, the NGOs are to perform the mission of *charting new relationships with government.*[89]

b. The Belarusians should get as much contact as possible with the people from Sweden and other countries, as well as Belarusian towns and universities should be involved into the regional cooperation through Sida activities. This is again consistent with *setting democratic standards* function, since the more contacts the Belarusians have with the outside world, the more information they get on the democratic principles and how they function in the society. [90]

The last mission foreseen by Carmichael, that of *formulating new frameworks supportive of civil society,* which includes NGOs participating in the creation of the new constitutional, legislative, and administrative frameworks within which civil society organisations can operate, is not mentioned in any of the documents. However, I believe, it is too early to speak about this mission in a state where all the newly-created laws and decrees are meant to limit the activities of the NGOs as much as possible, rather than to create favourable conditions for civil society functioning.

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[89] Retrieved from www.sida.se
[90] Retrieved from www.sida.se

To sum up, the three documents under analysis emphasise the great role civil society organisation play in the establishing of a democratic state. The role the NGOs have to play in the democratisation of Belarus can be regarded through the following missions: *charting new relationships with government, setting democratic standards,* and *activities related to democracy.*

6.2 The Role of the Participants' NGOs in Democratisation of Belarus

The partnership projects within the framework of Forum Syd Belarus programme cover a wide range of activities, depending on the organisations that run them. The NGOs dealing with sports, social work, ecology, youth as well as clearly political organisations were included into my sample. In my interviews, I was interested to know if the participants accepted that their organisations have any role in democratisation of Belarus, even if not being political, and if they think that they make any contribution, then of what kind.

6.2.1 What Belarusian and Swedish NGOs Can Do?

The absolute majority of respondents stated the democratisation of Belarus as some kind of a strategic goal of their organisations. However, there were certain exceptions from both sides who noted that they do not have such a goal, though they admitted their work produces democratising effect any way.

As far as fulfilling of the specific missions by the NGOs is concerned, the compliance is evident between the aims set in the official statements and the participants' idea of their NGOs contribution. Thus, 33% of the Belarusian interviewees mentioned that their organisations are doing attempt to *chart new relationships with government,* trying to influence the authorities' decision-making concerning their area of interest, or at least trying to seek some form of partnership with agencies of a state. The Association of Wheel-Chair Users is a very vivid example for that; they are actively participating in the discussion and decision-making of the state programmes, have managed to negotiate so that changes were made in the law to safeguard the interests of handicapped people.

The function of s*etting democratic standards* was stated as one of the main functions of the NGOs. Many of the participants see their function as showing people that they can unite and do something together, to spread democratic values, etc. This is the function where the Swedish part contributes a lot. By simply taking the members of the partner organisations to Sweden, to show how their organisations are working and how democracy is functioning in Sweden as a whole

they are introducing their Belarusian partners to the basic democratic standards with regards to transparency of decision-making, accountability, gender equality, etc.

The mission of *organising activities related to democracy* is reflected in the activities of two organisations, both of which are clearly pro-democratic: Young Front, which is famous by its street actions of protest, and Belarusian PEN Centre who is defending journalists who are accused of defamation in court by providing linguistic expertise of the texts as well as educating journalists to raise their standard of writing.

The considerations of the Swedish participants are mentioned separately, since it is natural that their organisations cannot have any direct influence on the transitional process in Belarus; they can only do that through their Belarusian partners. The majority of the Swedish participants considered their role as strengthening their partner, providing education on organisational structure, and some resources so that they in their turn could bring in the difference in the Belarusian society. Many of the Swedish partners believe that the new activities which they bring into Belarus will have a democratising effect. Good example of that could be organising cooperatives for disabled people (NGO Phoenix- Social Ekonomi i Roslagen), which is an idea of a small group of people uniting together to run their own business, where everybody has a share and participates in decision-making; introducing an absolutely new sport – frisbee, which is very democratic in its nature since there is no referee on the field, and all the controversial points are resolved by the players themselves.

6.2.2 Belarusian NGOs' Potential to Make a Difference Questioned by the Respondents

What I would like to mention specially is the critical attitude to Belarusian NGOs in regards to their democratizing effect that some of the respondents had. Interesting enough, this attitude is more characteristic of the Belarusian, rather than the Swedish side. Though being critical to the Belarusian NGOs, the respondents did not generalize about all of them, but rather mentioned some categories of them. For example, the ability of the Minsk NGOs to make any difference in the country was questioned as compared to the NGOs outside the capital

> *The majority of NGOs in Minsk are not really NGOs but rather consulting companies, which are applying for grants, get the funds and work. This is their work, and exalted aim of democratisation has nothing to do with it. While people in the countryside are eager participate even without money, they just need some basic things – premises to meet, means of communication...[91]*

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[91] B-1

The democratising effect of the small NGOs is also doubted. Organisations that unite 15-100 members are believed to be too insignificant to *create critical mass*[92] to bring any change in the society.

> *In Belarus I think there too many small NGOs formed by somebody that is trying to make a living on having a NGO. But there is no really membership based NGO, very few. Too many NGOs have too few members. Some people say MONGOs, My Own NGO...*[93]

Peculiar enough, 33% of the Belarusian respondents spoke of "other" NGOs that are well-structured, very professional and are some sort of business for their founders, and are thus not serving the population, but rather exist as a work-place for their members. These NGOs are not seen as contributing to democratisation in any way.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to explore the partnership of Belarusian and Swedish NGOs in relation to democratic ideas. What I intended to find out was if the Belarusian and Swedish partners share the same ideas of democracy, and if not, how their perceptions differed. Another question that I was interested in was if Belarusian NGOs and Swedish NGOs involved in partnership see democratisation of Belarus as a strategic goal of their activities and how they perceive the role of an NGO in the process of democratisation. To answer my research questions I have collected qualitative data through interviews and document analysis.

To study the partners' representations about democracy I have conducted 18 qualitative in-depth interviews with the representatives from both Belarusian and Swedish NGOs, as well as the persons responsible for the whole Belarusian programme.

The results show that representatives of Belarusian and Swedish NGOs have similar basic understanding of the concept of democracy; however, specific tendencies can be traced in detailed discussion.

1. The Swedish side tend to regard democracy at both the state and the organisational level, which means that the democratic processes both in the country in general and in their own organisation are important to them. Belarusians tend to limit their considerations to state level, regarding it as an ideal system of state rule.

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[92] B-5
[93] S-7

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2. In regards to the general understanding of democracy, the same number of Belarusians and Swedish respondents associated it with various forms of citizens' *political participation*, including membership in political parties or civil society organisations as a criterion of a well-functioning democracy. However, twice as many Belarusians as the Swedish respondents mentioned *basic civil rights and freedoms* as a necessary condition for democracy, while none of the Belarussian and at the same time almost half of the Swedish correspondents emphasised the *representative* nature of democracy.

3. Both Belarusian and Swedish interviewees upheld the importance of elections. However, only Swedish interviewees emphasised that it is the representative nature of democracy that is realised through the electoral process, while Belarusians were mostly speaking of some abstract choice which people can make through the elections. Belarusians also tended to refer to the current political situation in the country and to make reservation that elections are only important if they meet certain standards.

4. Both Belarusian and Swedish interviewees associate democratic citizenship with such forms of political participation as voting, being active in an NGO and in a community. Such *individual* traits as political activism, open-mindedness, and developed political interest have also been mentioned by the representatives of both sides. However, mentioning such qualities as *national identification* and *being law-abiding* were typical only for the Belarusians, whereas *antiracism* and *international activism were* characteristic for the Swedish respondents. Much more Swedes than Belarusians regard the *resource* dimension in addition to simply mentioning the personal characteristics, i.e. possibility to reinforce once attitudes in reality.

5. Belarusian and Swedish sides unanimously agree with the importance of the civil rights for a well-functioning democracy, though certain differences can be traced. The same number of respondents mentioned the freedom of expression, though there were more Swedish who stressed the importance of the free access to information to form one's opinion. The right to vote was predominantly mentioned by the Swedish respondents. Belarusians in their turn more often referred to such statements as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of their country.

6. The Swedish interviewees tend to show broader understanding of democracy, including social and economic equality in the obligations of a democratic state more often than Belarusians.

The three official documents creating the framework for the Belarusian-Swedish NGO partnership that I regarded in my analysis emphasise the great role civil society organisations

play in the establishing of a democratic state. The functions that they assume the Belarusian organisations will perform through their partnership with the Swedish NGOs are as follows:

1. *charting new relationships with authorities,* though aimed at local and regional officials, rather than those on the national level;
2. *setting democratic standards;*
3. *organising activities related to democracy.*

The discussions with the interviewees from both sides have proved that they do share the official point of view in regards the role NGOs are to play in the democratisation of Belarus, and fulfill one or several functions listed above. However, the democratising effect of the Belarusian NGOs are still questioned. In this way, the NGOs from the capital, small, and highly-professional, or "bureau-like" NGOs are sometimes seen as unable to make a change in the society.

As it has already been mentioned, the democratisation of Belarus is one of the main ideas behind the Swedish developmental aid channeled through NGO partnership, and thus, mutual understanding of the key issues such as democracy and the role of civil society are of major importance. The eventual differences in their understanding are likely lead to the communication gaps in the process of cooperation between Belarusian and Swedish partners. As the study has shown, there are certain tendencies in viewing democracy that differ the two sides involved in the cooperation. In this respect, I believe, more discussion and respect for others' opinion as well as more transparency are needed.

The topic of differences in visions of democracy has proven to be productive and relevant not at the least to the partners involved in the cooperation. However, as a suggestion for further research, possible explanations for the differences are to be found, whether it is pass dependency, cultural and religious background or any other factors.

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APPENDIX I:

The themes and questions around which the interviews were built:

Background information about organisation and partnership:

1. Please, tell me about your organisation, when it was started, what are the aims, target group.
2. Can you outline shortly the aim of your joint project with a Swedish (Belarusian) partner?
3. What activities do you run within the project?

Democracy

2. What is democracy for you?
3. Which role do elections play in a democratic system?
4. How would you describe a democratic citizen, how does he/she participate in the political life of a country?
5. Are civil rights important for democracy? Which ones?
6. Do you think economic equality has connection to democracy? Social, political equality?
7. Will you consider a state that has all the formal manifestations of democracy but still has a big gap between rich a poor as a democratic state?

The NGOs role in democratisation

1. Do NGOs play any role in democratisation? If yes, which role?
2. Do you see democratisation of Belarus as one of the strategic aims of you project?
3. Do you think your NGO contributes to democratisation of Belarus? In which way?