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Boriss Cilevičs: I wish that Belarusians do not lose their diversity which makes Belarus capable of understanding both the West and the East

The personality of Boriss Cilevičs does not need an additional introduction when it comes to the national minority issues. Since 1998 he is a member of the Saeima (Parliament) of Latvia. Since 1999 Mr. Cilevičs is an active member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in particular, he was elected first chair of the PACE Sub-Committee on Rights of Minorities (2005-2007).

In his exclusive interview for "Belarusian Review" Mr. Cilevičs provides his assessment of the situation of the national minorities in Belarus, discusses what elements of the CoE minority-related legal framework may be implemented into the Belarusian legislation, and describes the situation of national minorities in Latvia.

Belarusian Review: *How do you assess the current definition of "national minority" in Belarus?*

Boriss Cilevičs: I believe this de facto definition is quite inclusive and rather broad. As for the possible dispute about the need to establish any additional criteria, I consistently agree with those who say it is primarily the matter of identity and if someone claims the belonging to a minority we should be very cautious to question this personal choice. As the Permanent Court of International Justice stated as early as 1930, the existence of a minority is a matter of fact, not a question of law. So, I believe that if some persons claim that they are of minority kin we should hardly reconsider this. What makes me cautious regarding the Belarusian situation is certain confusion between the notions of "national minority" on the one hand and an organisation representing this minority on the other hand. This might trigger some controversies, in particular, if several organisations are established by persons belonging to a certain minority, i.e. this raises the question who is the real representative of this minority. This situation is typical for many European countries where a state is generous enough to financially support cultural activities of minority NGOs. Another issue to be considered is the fact that Belarusian legislation stipulates the minority organisations can be established only by citizens of the Republic of Belarus. I do not believe that such restriction is necessary. I follow the position of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities that always emphasises that any state does have a legitimate right to define which groups are considered as national minorities within the territory of this state, but this choice should not be arbitrary and under no circumstances should be discriminatory. I believe the more inclusive approach the state implements the better.

BR: *What are the lessons of Latvia and the CoE minority-related legal framework (if any) that may be adopted into the Belarusian legislation?*

BC: The European experiences is very diverse – there are cases of best practices and also some huge mistakes and abuses. I think it is difficult to learn from someone else mistakes as humans if at all tend to learn from their own mistakes and states seem to follow this path as well. What is important is not to lose the level of diversity which in Belarus is very high. And, as far as I understand, in terms of their cultural identity the persons who belong to the ethnic majority, i.e. ethnic Belarusians are also very diverse. The degree of personal multilingualism and multiculturalism is very high. Of course, for nationalists diversity is always a threat. But I am highly convinced that it is first of all a strong asset even though it brings a challenge which is not always easy to handle. What I would really like to wish Belarusians is to preserve and strengthen their national identity, the common identity of the entire people and at the same time not to lose their diversity which makes Belarus open and able to understand both the West and the East what is extremely important for the future. I believe that Belarus needs Europe and Europe needs Belarus. In the Council of Europe we miss this big European country in order to make the CoE a really pan-European organisation. Even though there are many obstacles on both sides, we should be cautious in blaming each other. I believe the day will come when Belarus becomes a full-fledged part of the united Europe. Belarus to a considerable extent implements in practice what we are talking about in the European Union – unity in diversity. Thus, it is very important to preserve these both components.

BR: *How do you evaluate the situation of national minorities in Latvia?*

BC: Generally Latvia is considered a success story in terms of minorities accommodation. I agree with this opinion to a limited extent. Our main achievement is that we managed to avoid any violence although many experts in conflict prevention predicted quite sad future for Latvia on the basis of purely formal criteria – ethnic proportions, language capacities, historical events, etc. But it appears that stability and peace are high priorities for the all involved groups. This is a great asset that we do not have history of violent conflicts unlike some other European states. On the other hand, we still have very serious problems with fair implementation of the Framework convention's provisions, particularly in the area of language legislation and ensuring effective participation, as well as full and effective equality of the persons belonging to minorities. These issues were seriously addressed but not resolved during the pre-accession negotiations. I think this period of political conditionality prior to the country's accession to the pan-European organisations ended too early for us. In fact, the main goal of this pre-accession political conditionality is not to make country meet formal legal and political criteria, but to achieve the situation that political elites of the country are able independently and without external guidance to take decisions that correspond to these written and unwritten criteria. Unfortunately, this has not been achieved, that is why the serious progress made before the accession stopped and has even been reversed. As a result,

some recent trends show that tensions in the society are growing. The criticism expressed by the Advisory Commission in particular areas is flatly rejected. I believe this is one of the reasons why emigration from Latvia is continuing. I very much hope that we have a potential to overcome these problems but we will have to work hard to do it.

Interview conducted by Hanna Vasilevich

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