

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN BELARUS – TURNING MYTH INTO REALITY

In considering any issues of building or developing the system of local self-government in Belarus, one should keep in mind that the current model of the country's local self-government is based on the theory of state-commanded local self-government, which fails to meet the democratic standards of governance, has attributes of breaking the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus and fails to meet the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The mismatch is so fundamental and systemic that allows experts to declare the virtual absence of any local self-government in Belarus, and to treat the existing local soviets as certain quasi-structures having no real impact on addressing and solving local issues.

The Republic of Belarus is the only country in Europe that has not signed the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and, de jure, is not obliged to enforce it. However, from the viewpoint of development and strengthening of the statehood, recognition of European standards and values, in view of development of cooperation with the Council of Europe, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and other influential international organizations, the need to accede to the Charter looks quite apparent.

The existing problems in the area of self-government may undermine the whole existing system of public administration. Let us consider some possible scenarios in this area:

1. Preservation of status quo – no change, except for cosmetic decisions or those directed at strengthening (toughening) the existing system.
2. "Imitation of reforms" – a set of decisions and actions that create a feeling of progressing towards establishment and development of real local self-government; in fact, the existing system remains unchanged. This alternative is able to create a short-term illusion of reforms in the sphere of local self-government and bring some political and economic dividends to the authorities (without any real implementation of the concept of local self-government).
3. "Reform" – preparing reforms and enforcing them; the process consists of the preparatory phase and implementation of the reform of local self-government through its legal support and administrative reinforcement. The strategic objective of this scenario option is to prepare all the institutions of state power, the civil society and citizens to a full-scale reform of local self-government, and to successfully implement it. The tactical task here is in choosing the methods, forms and mechanisms allowing escaping the situation of chaos, red tape (a boycott not excluded!) in the course of the reform, and in avoiding gross errors at the stage of its preparation, as well as in minimizing the resource costs of the reform.

Out of the above possible scenarios in the area of local self-government, Variant 1 looks most probable. It is most completely reflecting the views and interests of the ruling elite in the model of governance in general and local self-government in particular.

A possibility of developments under Variant 2 also exists; however, even an "imitation of reform" may present a danger to the ruling regime, as it breaks (in the first place – among the nomenclature) the trust in the correctness and stability of the chosen way. Besides, Variant 2 would require their public reasoning (including justification of the need and usefulness of the decisions made), which may be perceived by a part of nomenclature, the civil society, and citizens

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"in good faith", and trigger the real and poorly controlled from above transformations (similar to the "perestroika" and "glasnost" in the early 1990s). Still, given the political pressure and severe economic crisis Variant 2, as the product of diplomatic games and as a sort of some potential economic gingerbread, is possible.

The optimum way of developments is Variant 3; however, this is a scenario for another, new power, since it relies on the development of democracy in general and implementation of the principles and norms of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Any decision to implement any of the above Variants (including the already enacted Variant 1) is impossible without the approval of the President. At the same time, his closest retinue lacks a person (or group of persons) who could voice out the idea of local self-government. However, this does not mean that such people are not available around him at all.