

Freedom and Thinking. Essays on Civil Society

Uladzimir Matskevich

Excerpts from the book



Hereby you will find a collection of essays by Uladzimir Matskevich on civil society. This collection includes texts published by the author on his Facebook page from December 2019 to January 2020. This series of texts was written at the accomplishment of the Fresh Wind ¹ public campaign and served as a reflection on the current state of Belarusian civil society and a proposal of means and models for assessing and working with it. The key issue of these discussions was the question of whether Belarusian society can withstand modern challenges and threats. The starting point in the search for an answer was the polemic about whether there *is* civil society in Belarus as a subject that can influence political processes in the country, make decisions concerning “common causes”, and consolidate for the achievement of common goals.

The author analyses the foundations of civil society and the role media, public opinion, and the state play in its development and maintenance, how civil society relates to the nation, to different actions and practices of public participation.

Moving on to current challenges, Uladzimir Matskevich examines in detail the evolution of social connections and relations and raises questions about new forms of civil society in the contemporary era.

When reading this book, it should be taken into account that the text was written before the events of August 2020 in Belarus, which in many ways changed and expanded the practice of civic participation, and we now have an opportunity to assess these changes, including based on Uladzimir Matskevich’s ideas. The theoretical schemes and pivots presented in the book are the keys to helping the reader “grasp” the author’s concept of understanding civil society and, based on that, shape their attitude to the present condition of Belarusian civil society.

The author does not try to take the position of an outside observer in relation to the “object of study”; on the contrary, he offers a view from within civil society, from the position which can certainly be called a leadership one. For Matskevich, leadership is a personal attitude towards taking a proactive stance, expressed primarily in intellectually embracing the object – civil society – in all its diversity and uniqueness. As the author himself might say, in “thinking civil society.”²

The title of the book contains two main characteristics of civil society – freedom and thinking – which, for Matskevich, constitute its essence and meaning, its *modus vivendi*. Although these two entities cannot be reduced to each other, there is a firm connection between them. The author draws upon this subject in one of his texts: “First, thinking becomes free, then it makes everything else free. But thinking cannot but be free, otherwise, it is no longer thinking. If Belarus is not free in the choice of the way of its development, then its thinking through this way is not free, therefore, the country is not free (unable) to think, therefore, it does not think”³. Thus, this collection of essays

should be seen as an orientation to emancipating thinking about civil society, to freeing it from the usual schemes and frameworks that influence the way we think about this complex, ambiguous, and sometimes elusive object.

Editor's foreword (Kiryl Maltsau, Ales Zalesski)

Excerpts from the book

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Civic action and behaviour

Civil society is inconceivable without public opinion; public opinion is inconceivable without the media. But civil society is also about civil action, civil behaviour.

People have not changed in thousands of years. But in the last few centuries, people have become citizens. Everyone has human needs, concerns and worries, people act as people, as representatives of their culture according to customs and traditions. A traditional society is a society of people.

Civil society is a society of citizens. A person does not perform civic acts and actions all the time, but only in appropriate situations. These situations do not happen every day, not even every month. They occur from time to time. And not for everyone. People, simple people do not find themselves in civil situations, they pass by, or these situations bypass them.

Civil society ideologists rely on notions “the people”, “the whole people” and often misuse them. The whole people never comes out to demonstrations; the whole people never takes part in revolutions; individual groups of people revolt and individual citizens become involved in solving national and other political problems.

Citizens can involve other people in their collective actions, for whom those actions have a completely different meaning or no meaning at all.

The French revolutionaries mobbed the crowd to storm the Bastille. Who was in that crowd? Citizens? Not necessarily. They were just excited, angry people. Anger poured out in the storming of the Bastille, in the storming of the Winter Palace – it always pours out in some action like that. Good or bad, sensible or senseless. It is great if they are humane and civilized, not bloody and savage.

Civic action is somewhat different.

But first, let's talk about the connection between public opinion and public behaviour and action. And this connection is manifested in different ways at all stages of the evolution of civil society.

1. In the 18th century, the ideal of citizens, the educated part of society and revolutionaries was the direct democracy of Athens, republican Rome, and medieval urban communes.

But almost all of them understood that such democracy was no longer possible in the class society of absolutist monarchies.

Society at that time was rather complex. "The people" was already present as a category for a part of society, a larger part. But this category did not contain any indication of agency and political competence. It was not at all the same people as in the Athenian democracy, and not even the same people as in the Roman Republic. The people was taken into account only as elements, a mass of people capable of organising in crowds and doing something, which had to be reckoned with by the authorities and other constituents of society.

Actually, society was the "laity" – laical society. It took some effort to be part of the laical society – to "be introduced to the laity". As a rule, it included a "high society", which at first was identified with the court nobility, and later with upper strata in terms of property qualification and cultural capital. A poor poet, artist or scientist could be introduced to or "brought into the laity". There were various circles, Masonic lodges, clubs or orders, guilds, secret societies and other societies which had survived since the Middle Ages.

Both "the laity" and "the people" were politically disenfranchised. Probably, except for England, where the nobility had political rights from the 13th century under the Bill of Rights. The Polish-Lithuanian nobility liberties was more of a medieval remnant. They did not meet the demands of the time. Being part of the laity did not mean anything, except for connections and acquaintances. Connections could open the way to clubs, from which political parties later grew.

In the 18th century, the popular crowds became an instrument of political struggle and political action. The Boston Tea Party and the storming of the Bastille were organised with the help of crowds.

The people in the crowd had an opinion. This is different from public opinion in the second half of the 19th century. Crowd opinion is a slogan that is picked up or a direction indicated for the use of force. Crowd opinion arises instantly when, amid emotional excitement, the crowd begins to chant a slogan planted by someone else. There is effectively no distance between the emergence of this "opinion" and the transition to action. A slogan or an appeal may instantly become an action.

This property of a crowd – an instant transition from words and opinions to action – is always valued by politicians and leaders. It was always considered very dangerous and unacceptable by thinkers and enlighteners (thinkers of the Enlightenment era). This was the ambivalent attitude of Immanuel Kant towards the French Revolution. He admired the values and aims of the revolution and resented the manifestations of mob revolt and their destructive behaviour.

2. The organisation of society according to the principles of civil society, which took shape during the Enlightenment and became quite common in the 19th century, created a great distance between opinion and action. Some time had to pass from the formation of public opinion to its implementation in politics:

- First, public opinion is formulated based on an individual opinion that has the potential to become popular. This too is a long process involving analytical work and criticism. Not so much according to Kant, but close to it; one can relate this stage to a critique of the power of judgement. Not all individual opinions may be accepted as judgments and not all private judgments may become a basis for public opinion;
- The shaped public opinion has to go through public discussions according to the principle “score twice before you cut once”. Public opinion is always dialectical. Whatever the majority opinion may be, the majority itself is not a sufficient basis for adopting it as a basis for action. More often than not, the opposite is true: the majority opinion is the worst basis for political action and choice.

The ability of the crowd to shift instantly, without reflection or criticism, from opinion to action (from something on mind to something in kind) has often been used by the “laical public” and politicians in the struggle between factions, parties and approaches. But no one was going to allow the crowd (and basically all the people) to take long-term decisions and thorough political action. The crowd was used for destruction while creation was left to the upper classes.

Actually, after the liquidation of class barriers, these upper strata considered themselves to be a civil society. According to the results of reflection and comprehension of the Great French Revolution, civil society was identified with the bourgeoisie. Belonging to civil society was defined by property and cultural qualifications.

The bourgeoisie shared the values of democracy and the Enlightenment. On this basis, the right to vote was distributed as the main resource of democracy. Voting rights were granted to members of civil society (property owners and literate people capable of forming and criticising opinions and judgements before making a decision). The majority of the people, on the other hand, were disenfranchised.

The main lines of social division and socio-political conflict in the 19th century were:

- Electoral rights;
- Literacy and mass education.

Literacy and education were needed by all ruling classes in the context of the scientific-industrial revolution and industrialisation. But education led to the awareness of rights. Aware of their rights, the masses began to demand participation in governance to establish justice in the distribution of not only rights but also public goods.

The proletariat came to the fore and began to demand first a just distribution of public goods and then the right to vote to participate in the management of that distribution.

But some parties wanted the proletariat disenfranchised and destitute. They saw it as a “negative class”, as a potential huge crowd that could instantly go “from something on mind to something in kind”.

“The negative class”, or the class that has “nothing to lose but its chains”, is the main resource of the revolution. That is why it is negative, since it is only capable of destruction, of negative action. A fierce struggle has broken out over this resource, over the control of the “negative class”, between

all kinds of political clubs, factions and parties. A mass of all kinds of words and slogans was hurled at the poor proletariat.

All sought influence over a class capable of rapidly organising itself into a crowd and creating an invincible social force. Preachers and demagogues from Christian prophets to anarchists, from Utopian socialists to the “scientific communists” Marx and Engels competed for this influence.

That competition for influence over the proletariat demanded the rapid spread of enlightenment and education of the class. That was the point of intersection of the interests of the revolutionaries and the bourgeoisie. A newspaper boom began. One-off leaflets, daily newspapers, magazines and miscellanies, pamphlets and books became the scene of political struggle. However, strikes, barricades, revolts and uprisings were not abandoned.

The ideological struggle for influence over the proletariat and the use of the proletariat as a “negative class” for their self-serving purposes to solve their political problems climaxed during the Paris Commune.

From that time the era of the dominance of bourgeois civil society began; the absolutist monarchies of Russia, Austria-Hungary and partly Germany continued to exist but became anachronistic.

During that period, the proletariat lost the qualities of a “negative class”, it became sufficiently educated and received electoral rights. And most importantly, it replenished civil society through its own clubs, parties and unions. Civil society becomes a “Tardian public” capable of criticism of any opinion.

The public could sometimes gather in crowds, but they were not the crowds capable of storming the Bastille, making revolutions and engaging in street fights anymore. The distance from opinion to action was expanding, and the rapid transition from words to actions was becoming very difficult. Some political forces were unhappy with this state of affairs. Future Bolsheviks, fascists and Nazis were yet to see their moment of glory.

Traditional society was living out its last decades. But archaic absolutist monarchies unleashed World War I.

3. They lost the war. Absolutism was over. But who won that war?

The Russian monarchy fell first. But Russia did not have a strong civil society. Political forces came to power who managed to exploit the property of crowds – the instant passage from words to actions. All that mattered was to inculcate the simplest phrasing of opinion in society.

The Russian social democrats were very proud of the scientificity of their doctrine. But that doctrine was accessible only to a very narrow stratum, a small club. The members of that club called themselves “Bolsheviks”, “Mensheviks” and “professional revolutionaries”. They divided the rest of society into enemies (the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, the gentry) and the people (the proletariat and the peasantry, whom they viewed as a “negative class”, as a resource for quickly gathering crowds and pushing these crowds to destruction – “The earth shall rise on new foundations”). What should happen next was not communicated to the people, but substituted with ringing slogans. From 1917 onwards, civil society was abolished in Russia and totalitarianism set in. Radio and cinema

substituted education; labour armies substituted society; battles for the harvest and labour records substituted everyday work.

In another defeated monarchy, republican rule and democracy are initially established. But communists and Nazis become the most powerful political forces. Both are supporters of “direct action”.

“Direct action” is justified by the ideals of direct democracy, but this is only camouflage. What the communists and Nazis really needed was a momentary transition “from words to actions”, from opinion to implementation.

But both the German communists and the rising National Socialists had to deal with a nation of many millions, rather than urban communities, as was the case in revolutionary Paris (Budapest, Vienna and other cities). The speaker could have the crowd in the square excited and lead it to storm a building. But one cannot expect to be heard from a podium by millions.

That’s where scientific and technological progress comes in. Hitler makes full use of radio and nascent aviation to move quickly across Germany. In addition to technical means, the Nazis are the first to master humanitarian technologies, namely Le Bon’s crowd theory and Tarde’s theory of the public, as well as Weber’s notion of charismatic leadership.

Not everyone can turn the public into a crowd even employing radio, as the leader speaking to a microphone and sounding from loudspeakers throughout a multimillion country must be endowed with charisma and unquestionable authority.

Totalitarianism was first established in Russia, which did not have a large proletariat. The lumpen, the demoralised army, impoverished peasants and the disoriented inhabitants of the national outskirts were used as the “negative class”. Crowds of declassified “Reds”, “Greens” and colourless bandits destroyed everything they could get their hands on.

But the Bolsheviks had no theory or schemes for building a totalitarian society. Stalin had learned this from Hitler in the 1930s. The charismatic leadership of the Führer-Chief was copied in the form of a cult of personality.

The victorious countries of World War I and the fragments of the Habsburg empire established unstable democracies. With industrialisation coming to an end, totalitarian tendencies appeared in these countries too. Dictatorial regimes were established in small countries of Eastern, Central and Southern Europe on the fascist model.

Who knows if the old democracies of the Old and New World could have withstood the onslaught of totalitarianism had Nazi Germany’s claim to world domination and the USSR’s striving for a world revolution not resulted in World War II.

The totalitarian regimes lost the war they had unleashed. Nazi Germany lost immediately, and the USSR survived several more decades of the Cold War.

Democracies and civil society proved victorious on a global scale. This victory was formalised in the Declaration of Human Rights, in the creation of instruments to control international relations and prevent wars – the UN and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).

4. *However, immediately after the establishment of international institutions of democratic control, global civil society faced new challenges.*

Civil society was challenged not only by the totalitarian regimes in the USSR and China which had survived World War II, but also by the consumer society which emerged in the context of post-war rapid economic growth.

Having satisfied their need for “bread”, ordinary people in developed countries have felt an insatiable need for “circuses”, forgetting their civic duties. The technical side of meeting the need for the circus was satisfied by the film industry (the “dream factory”), replicated music, and the spread of television.

The attainment of universal literacy made it possible to give voting rights to almost the entire population, and civil and human rights were extended to the entire population of democratic countries. *But having become universal, civil rights lost value in the eyes of ordinary people, yielding to material and “spiritual” (rather, entertainment and recreational) values of consumption.*

Political parties and clubs immediately took advantage of this, turning elections into a show, and the exercise of civil rights into burdensome procedures that lost appeal in the eyes of ordinary people. Democracy degenerated into oligarchy and even plutocracy.

The values of the Enlightenment (modernity) – criticism, reason, discussion – are reinterpreted in postmodernist ideology.

While in the age of modernity and the formation of civil society public discussion based on critical thinking was designed to ensure social compromise and, ideally, to achieve social consensus, in the consumer society of the postmodern era, the value of dissensus is promoted, which makes discussion aimless and ineffective. Discussions are ritualistic, everyone stays with their opinions, no decisions are made, and they do not lead to action. Politics and governance are exercised by oligarchic groups.

By the late 1980s, nation-states (and civil society defined within the boundaries and frameworks of nation-states) were losing their influence in the world, giving way and primary role to transnational corporations (TNCs).

By this time, the theory of convergence of two socio-political systems – democracy and civil society, on the one hand, and socialism, on the other hand – became widespread.

But by the same time, the Cold War of these two systems ended, in which the socialist camp lost and collapsed. However, socialism and socialist ideas became popular in the countries of the “free world”, i.e. where civil society had existed for more than a century.

This dialectical situation had several consequences.

Oligarchs and plutocrats who brought TNCs to the forefront of national and international politics took control of civil society. Instead of self-organisation, volunteering and subsidiary responsibility for their decisions, civil society organisations (NGOs and NPOs) switched to funding by various foundations.

The first foundations which concentrated financial resources for support of civic initiatives were a structural part of the civil society. But gradually they became part of the state financial system and moved from fundraising (seeking and raising funds for their purposes) to guaranteed funding from state budgets. This enabled the state to control the activity of NGOs and NPOs, dictating their agenda and determining which projects received funding and therefore a competitive advantage over other initiatives and projects.

The history of the Soros foundations may be typical in this respect. The first Soros fund was established in Sweden to support the Czechoslovak Charter⁷⁷ back in the late 1970s. It was a typical civil society initiative. Afterwards, the Open Society Foundations operated in various countries and existed in this form until the mid-1990s, when even a billionaire lost the ability to maintain such a fund. The fund started to be financed from the state budgets and became accountable. The same thing happened with other private foundations of this type.

But the transfer of NGOs and NPOs under the control of states and governments was accompanied by a loss of influence on world politics by TNCs. States and supranational state structures (the EU, in the first place) regained their dominant role.

5. At the beginning of the new millennium, civil society faced new problems. NGOs and NPOs, which had become the main form of civic activity, became bureaucratized and dependent on foundations and states. Real civic activity is forced to look for new forms for its existence.

This is not easy. Old forms like Masonic lodges and semi-secret societies have survived. They continue to exist, but rather as decorative and ritual elements.

Modernist clubs and associations have survived and even new ones have emerged, like the Club of Rome.

Many NGOs and NPOs are trying to regain the initiative and are taking over from foundations and state structures that are imposing their agenda on the organisations, and this struggle for the initiative is going on with mixed results.

The religious revival, the emergence of neo-Protestant churches and their rapid development in the 1980s and 1990s was in a way a manifestation of the search for new forms of civil society existence.

In countries where there is no stable tradition of civil society, new forms and types of organisation emerge. They sometimes take ugly forms (e.g. ISIS) and develop into a cascade of revolutions known as the Arab Spring.

The Ukrainian Maidan uprisings can also be seen in the context of the history and evolution of civil society.

The technical innovations of the digital age have their effect on innovations in civil society. The Internet as a means of mass communication is undermining the monopoly of television and making it impossible to control mass consciousness as it was in the 1950s and 1990s.

In our time, a complex conflation of modern and postmodern values, residual ideologies of the industrial and post-industrial era is emerging.

Perhaps researchers, sociologists and philosophers of the future can analyse our era in detail, finding a place for every phenomenon and event that we now experience, create or simply observe as witnesses. What we think of as innovation and try to adapt to will once be the historical past and archival material for people of the future.

But we have to live with it and act on it.

To understand it in the face of high uncertainty. To look for reasonable and effective ways of action. To build a civil society in the age of the Internet, digital technologies, global accessibility.

We have to think globally to effectively act locally.

We should do it in Belarus. This is our place of action.

However, before acting, it is necessary to think thoroughly about both the actions and their consequences.

All old templates and stencils will have to be discarded. And no one, except for us, will be able to offer us new ones.

Civil society and Enlightenment ideals

Civil society is the realisation of Enlightenment ideals, their modern embodiment.

Ideals are ideals because they are valid only when they are followed, when they are turned into reality.

Ideals vary. Communism is also a set of ideals. Fascism is a set of ideals, and so is Nazism. The ideals are different, and they are shared by different people. People realise their ideals in a shared reality. The ideals of family and love are first realised by two people, then children and family – their togetherness – add up. A village community is a totality of neighbours who own some resources communally, where people make joint decisions within the limits of their togetherness. There can be large communities: cities, nations, and they share the same characteristics. Just on a larger scale and with a wider range of problems.

Village or church community and traditional society are characterised by great homogeneity of ideals. There, everyone (or at least the majority) shares the same ideals.

However, modern big cities and nations cultivate various – sometimes antagonistic – sets of ideals. Aristotle described the ancient city as a unity of the distinct. Even more so, modern nations are made up of totally dissimilar communities. The achievement of unity of the distinct is the essence of politics.

We can have different ideals, but we have only one city. Similarly, the sovereignty of a nation extends to a one shared territory. The constitution and the state institutions are the same for the whole nation. All this is somehow organised and structured. It is organized according to certain

rules, norms, principles, standards, and laws. All these norms, standards, and laws trace back to some ideals: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Justice, and respect for human rights.

But each of the ideals can be contrasted with another ideal.

Freedom can be contrasted with order or security. Equality of one type can be contrasted with equality of another. Justice can be contrasted with the “letter of the law”. Human rights are challenged by the rights of the community.

The nation consists of different minorities professing various ideals and communicating with each other over which ideals are to be realised in a particular city or state.

It is possible to do without communication. One can impose laws, standards, and principles by force, without engaging in discussions about ideals. Might goes before discussions. The dictate of the majority is another forceful option.

Totalitarianism is based on the fact that the whole society, all people share the same ideals and values. Any questioning of the dominant ideals and values is regarded as a crime. The holders of other ideals and values are subject to correction and re-education, and up to a certain time, to isolation. In extreme cases, they must be annihilated.

Civil society exists when all values and ideals are discussed and debated. Upon reaching at least some compromise on ideals in society, a discussion is ignited about the principles and laws that should govern the realisation of those ideals.

Once the principles have been worked out, laws have been passed and norms have been standardised, a struggle and competition emerge over who can do a better job in implementing these principles, enforcing laws, implementing standards, etc.

Civil society is a daily plebiscite, a constant debate and continuous communication.

When would people find time to work then? Would there be time to create material values and conditions for endless discussions and continuous communication?

It is a serious problem.

In the 18th century, the problem was solved very simply: there was slavery, serfdom, and the urban poor. While some worked, others debated, discussed, and made decisions on behalf of everyone that would influence everyone. Civil society was represented by a limited circle of rich, educated citizens who had a lot of free time. The entire civil society fit into several city clubs.

In the 19th century, the secular society and members of clubs who had a lot of free time and did not have to earn their bread and material wealth began to be considered a parasitic class, and the existence of that class was seen as a flagrant injustice. The emancipation of the proletariat began. The ideals of the French Revolution implied equality for all. But people who worked hard from dawn to dusk simply did not have the physical opportunity to participate in the communication of civil society. So first the struggle for economic rights, wages and reduction of working hours emerged, and then the right to vote and participate in the life of the society.

In the 20th century, material problems in developed countries were largely solved. With the introduction of the 8-hour day, almost everyone had the opportunity to participate in society, and a person could choose whether to become an active citizen or have a strictly private life. Every adult, irrespective of race, religion, property, gender or even education, gained the right to vote (i.e. to participate in public decision-making) and to be elected (i.e. to participate in communication about public affairs at the expense of society itself).

Nowadays, we have to look for our own solution to this problem, and it is already being sought; options are being discussed and debated.

In the 18th century, members of civil society could be visually identified by starched wigs, doublets, knee-breeches and stockings. Sanctimonious people wearing long trousers and boots were not allowed to communicate with the public.

In the turbulent 19th century, even workers aspiring to be citizens wore top hats and frock coats.

In the 20th century, it became a bad form to differ in appearance; workers fundamentally refused to imitate the clothing of the upper parasitic classes, who had to come to terms with it, and by the end of the millennium everyone indiscriminately wore jeans and rejected ties. The dress code was only preserved for employees during working hours, whether in a private firm or parliament. But these are trifles.

The main challenge to civil society in the postmodern era was the rejection of Enlightenment ideals.

Since the era of powdered wigs and doublets of the enlighteners of the 18th century, civil society has been inextricably linked with education and critical thinking.

Where there is no critical thinking – there is no civil society. Nineteenth-century workers studied intensively. The capitalists taught them literacy and special skills, while the workers themselves studied Marxist and social theory, law and humanities. “To study communism well and truly” was not Lenin’s idea. It is a legacy of the revolutionary age. To be able to participate in public communication you had to reach out to thought leaders, and learn and master the language of such communication.

The upper classes enlightened and pulled everyone else up to their level, in full accordance with the ideals of the Enlightenment philosophers and thinkers. The Age of Enlightenment is also called the Modern Age. “Modern age” translates as “modernity”. Until the very end of the 20th century, it is following the Enlightenment ideals that was called the modern age, or modernity.

The Russian intelligentsia – the Narodniks – were the first to abandon the ideals of the Enlightenment. Instead of elevating the lower classes to their level, the Narodniks began to idealise the people, their “inherent wisdom” and sense of justice. A radical change of ideals took place. Rather than the refined critical thinking of the Enlighteners, the irrational “popular wisdom” became the ideal. The Bolsheviks then began to rely on the “class instinct” inherent in the proletariat, in much the same way that the Nazis idealised the “call of the Aryan blood”.

In Europe, the rejection of the Modern Age/Enlightenment ideals was facilitated by postmodernism. This rejection is linked to a re-interpretation of the concept and category of “critical thinking”.

Participation in the discussion of social issues is impossible without appropriate education, competence, and training. This competence is achieved by mastering the current level of knowledge about social problems, while training manifests itself in developing a critical attitude towards all versions, hypotheses and proposals. In other words, one has to KNOW what one knows, one has to UNDERSTAND it, and what one understands is subject to ANALYSIS and CRITICISM.

It is only with knowledge, understanding, analysis and criticism that evaluation and decision-making can take place.

The totalitarian ideals of the Nazis and Bolsheviks absolutized “direct action”, i.e. assessment and decision-making without KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING, ANALYSIS and CRITICISM, but rather immediate based on the “call of the blood” or “class instinct”. The hasty assessments and decisions had to be followed by the immediate implementation of the decisions.

That is why totalitarian regimes hate democracy. They see it as a hindrance to quick assessments, decisions and actions. They also hate parliamentarism, which, for them, is “all talk and no action”.

Postmodernism has nothing to do with Nazism and Communism, although most postmodern thinkers hold left-wing views.

Postmodernism rejects knowledge, understanding, analysis and criticism in favour of the ideals of political correctness and the equality of all and any opinions.

At the same time, postmodernists declare critical thinking to be one of their basic principles. But by critical thinking they mean somewhat different from definitions developed by Kant and the Enlighteners – specifically, questioning of the ideals of modernity and the Enlightenment and a search for ideals opposed to them. Postmodernist criticism is directed against any absolutes; to every positive statement, they must offer an antinomy. Whatever the judgement, there may be a contrary one.

In the postmodern era, critical thinking once again becomes the specific skill of a narrow stratum of intellectuals who do not wear wigs but dress like sansculottes.

Why do workers, engineers, and civil servants need critical thinking? Why would a plumber or a tractor driver need critical thinking?

The difference in the interpretation of critical thinking is seen in what the criticism is aimed at.

The leftist postmodernist intellectual is critical of the traditional values and conservative attitudes of plumbers, tractor drivers and farmers – and of all traditional and conservative values, attitudes and ideals in general.

The modern age intellectual (enlightener) directs their criticism first of all to their own judgment and ideas, to the ontological essences of pure reason and the practical conclusions of mundane and professional consciousness.

The intellectual needs critical thinking to question the ideals and values of their time. Not of the past, ancient and traditional – although that too – but first of all doubting the opinions and perceptions of their time, the attitudes of their contemporaries, i.e. their own.

It is precisely this quality, this ability that is universal in an open and civil society, i.e. necessary for both the philosophy professor and the plumber – doubting what one knows and thinks.

The postmodernist criticises the ideals of the Modern Age, but not their own, and the plumber suggests the same – do not criticise your own opinion, you are perfectly within your rights, all opinions are equally valuable and so is yours. Unless, of course, the plumber's opinion differs greatly from that of the postmodernist professor.

In the genre and form I chose for this text, I can confine myself to a slightly exaggerated statement of the juxtaposition of the ideals of the modern and the postmodern age.

This contrast is particularly evident in public practice, in politics and citizens' movements, rather than in academic works.

While philosophers, intellectuals, journalists, popularisers of science and opinion leaders in the first half of the 20th century were still elevating the opinions of ordinary people to the highest achievements of their time, by the end of the century they were doing exactly the opposite. Every writer, whether in literature, philosophy or politics, was advised to listen to "what the people think".

That is, instead of pulling public opinion up to the understanding of the leaders, they began to relegate the leaders to the average and the opinion of the majority.

The Modern Age enlighteners were dealing for a rise. Not only did they focus on the highest achievements in science, philosophy and politics, but oriented and guided public opinion, raising mainstream culture from the middle to the highest level.

Postmodern intellectuals themselves aspire to descend to the middle level and shun anyone who tries to rise above it. This is evident in all areas of culture, from popular music and box office cinema to political teachings and philosophy.

In politics, it has caused populism to prevail in all the developed countries of Europe and America.

In science and philosophy, it leads to the isolation of intellectuals in an academic ghetto.

For civil society, the ideals of the postmodern age mean complete degradation and the reduction of public communication to local activism and *grassroots* rigorism.

Civil society in Belarus does exist

I know this for a fact because it was the solidarity of civil society that saved me from death in October 2006⁴.

With the support of civil society in 2009-2010, we defeated Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei's Public Advisory Council with its profanation of public participation. Civil society's insistence on the creation of the Eastern Partnership programme replaced the European Commission's decorative plan with one that included the real representation and work of the civil

society of all countries as full-fledged actors in the political process⁵. The solidarity that followed the disgraceful elections and the violent suppression of the 2010 protest is known to everyone who has their eyes open.

Many people refuse to admit the existence of civil society and do not want to know anything about it.

It is understandable why the regime, its ideologists, its guards and overseers prefer to not know.

Unfortunately, those who were appointed as analysts, commentators, and intellectuals in Belarus do not want to know anything about civil society either. Actually, they shape the state of civil society that we have today.

Civil society does exist. What it is like, what its capacity is – is another question.

Admittedly, its capacity is not the best. But “I have no other civil society for you”. If I can rely on anything, it is only on civil society.

Indeed, it saved me from death 13 years ago. But more often than not, it failed me. It did so because of its immaturity, passivity, subservience, and obedience.

It is what it is. I have no one else to appeal to. Even if they can't hear me. Even if civil society is dominated by ideas opposed to mine.

Civil society has not always existed. It began to take shape at the same time and under the same conditions as modern nations and nation-states were founded only two and a half centuries ago.

In the first hundred years of its existence, civil society was represented by the greatest thinkers and heroes.

Kant and Voltaire, the founders of the United States of America, and the members of the French National Constituent Assembly who overthrew the monarchy were conscious of being citizens.

Eighteenth-century civil society was transnational. Immanuel Kant emphasised the moral foundations of the French Revolution. Benjamin Franklin influenced French revolutionaries, while his French friends took part in the American War of Independence. Tadeusz Kościuszko was a general in the continental US army, obtained American citizenship, befriended Thomas Jefferson, and fought against slavery in the US and serfdom in Lithuania.

It was a heroic period in the existence of civil society.

By the end of the 19th century, civil society had evolved into what Gabriel Tarde called the public. The public, especially the general public, cannot consist of thinkers and heroes alone. But the public is a bearer of public opinion, a holder and embodiment of the ideas that constitute public opinion.

Totalitarian regimes of the 20th century seized the means of shaping public opinion, took the public under total control, and destroyed the civil societies of the seized nations.

Only civil society is capable of resisting the totalitarian regimes of communism, Nazism and fascism. Where civil society failed to consolidate, the Bolsheviks, Nazis, Falangists and the like won. A coalition of the countries with a strong civil society won World War II.

But after the war, even democratic regimes became apprehensive of civil society. However, civil society itself had been badly degraded. From a society of thinkers and heroes (who created and gave flesh and blood to ideas), having passed the stage of the general public (holders and interpreters of ideas), civil society began to degenerate into a consumerist society (consumers and profaners of ideas).

However, in the 20th century, nations existed in two guises: the state and the civil society opposed to it.

By the end of the 20th century, they tried to keep civil society in Europe within the confines of the NGOs⁶, or the “third sector”. Civil society was pushed to the background after the “first sector” (the state) and the “second sector” (business and economic agents) began to play an important role. Earlier, businesses and entrepreneurs did not separate themselves from civil society.

But the civil society cannot be reduced to NGOs, although they are part of it.

Just like 250 years ago, civil society is primarily about thinkers and heroes. About personalities with civic consciousness, civic conscience, and civic courage.

They might disagree with each other on many issues. They clash and quarrel. But it is one of the main modes of civil society’s existence – to clash and argue about everything that citizens consider fundamental, important, valuable or dangerous.

But only if it is fundamental and important!

What is or is not important is up to each citizen to decide. Civil society is an emergent entity of multiple individual citizens.

Modern states in Europe are depoliticising civil society, both in their countries and in the countries seeking to join or build partnership relations with the European Union.

The EU states have restricted civil society activities to charity, social, humanitarian, and local issues, thus isolating NGOs from politics. NGOs are kept by the state and partly private funds, which are anyway controlled by the state. Civil society in other countries is used by the European states and the Brussels bureaucracy simply as a crowd for international events and endorsement of bilateral inter-state relations, which is manifested in the Eastern Partnership countries.

They seek to cram an obedient public into a “Procrustean bed of NGOs”⁷ but civil society still exists and cannot be divorced from politics. It was in civil society that the “green movement” was born. It broke into politics by hacking the “first sector” through “green parties”, through international movements. It is civil society that is forcing states to solve global environmental problems, no matter how much the states shy away from these issues.

Civil society heroes are the first to get into the hot spots of the planet, to raise the most important issues of the global world order, not forgetting the human and humanitarian dimensions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed to many researchers that the role of nation-states was declining and that they were giving way to transnational corporations. But in the 21st century, states have regained their positions and are trying, along with TNC oligarchs, to manipulate civil society.

The Belarusian state is also imperfect. Moreover, it has been hijacked by a group that has in effect privatised it.

The Belarusian state needs to be re-established⁸.

Who can re-establish the state though?

Only civil society can. This is the way it has been done for 250 years since the first modern nation-states were formed in America and Europe – the USA and the French First Republic.

The unitary or federative state of the Rzeczpospolita could have been the third such state in the world. But it failed for two reasons:

◆ The archaic method of establishment. The state was established (the famous Constitution of 3 May 1791) in the old way by the magnates and the active part of the gentry, with almost zero participation from civil society, which had not yet had time to form and consolidate. The coexistence of feudal archaic and medieval remnants with modern trends was not viable;

◆ External aggression. Both the French Republic and the new Rzeczpospolita were resented by the absolutist monarchies and empires of Europe. Both France and the Rzeczpospolita were unable to withstand the consolidated absolutist coalition and England that was going through the first industrial revolution. France managed to maintain its integrity with the restoration of the monarchy. The territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was divided between the three victorious empires. These empires only had 100 years to live. However, the development of the Rzeczpospolita (Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians) came to a standstill for a century. Two of the four nations were able to establish their states after World War I, while the other two had to wait another 70 years. Even so, neither Ukraine nor Belarus has coped with all the challenges of forming a nation and establishing a capable state.

Why can't anyone establish a state except civil society? There is simply no one else. Nobody else has agency and power. Except for the states themselves. A state can be established by another state or a group of states. But then it would not be a nation-state, but the result of external collusion or conspiracy.

Such states do exist, including in Europe. And we, in Belarus, are one such state.

The Belarusian Popular Republic (BPR) – the first Belarusian state – was not *de jure* or *de facto* recognised by any other states. The Belarusian SSR was established by the Soviet authorities, i.e. another state.

It is time for us to get down to business ourselves, to finish what was started by the founders of the BPR and demand the recognition of the BPR Rada – the institution we inherited from our forefathers – so that we would finish what they started, and the Rada could transfer its powers to a real nation-state – the Republic of Belarus.

It is clear what the civil society of Belarus has to do now.

But how?

More on this will follow, but first, we will have to dismantle, analyse, and describe the condition of civil society in today's Belarus, which has to perform its historical mission at this stage of the development of the nation and the country.

The courage to have a personal opinion

In various situations, I have often heard the statement: "I represent the civil society of Belarus/X-land". This statement has always been annoying to me.

First of all, I know for a fact that no one has ever received the authority to speak on behalf of any country's civil society. There is simply no such procedure, no such body or assembly that can delegate to someone the right to represent civil society.

Secondly, this is something that has to do with the very notion and category of civil society. Civil society is not at all a community of special people who are different from others; it is a collective name for free citizens who are equal to each other, and none of them is "more equal" than others to speak on behalf of or represent others. In civil society, each citizen represents only and exclusively themselves.

But then, what is the power of civil society if everyone only represents themselves? Let's try to sort it out.

The Italian writer Franco Magnani once shared an almost paradoxical idea: "The more citizens with civil courage a country has, the less it needs heroes".

Normally, courage and heroism go together, but here they are divorced. However, we are talking about a special kind of courage – civil courage (*Zivilcourage*). This is indeed a special kind of courage. Alexander von Humboldt put it this way: "Jeder muss den Mut zu seiner Meinung haben" ("Everyone should have the courage to have a personal opinion").

It may be difficult for a modern person to understand; having a personal opinion seems very easy today, so what has courage got to do with it? For a modern person, the phrase "Jeder muss seiner Meinung haben" ("Everyone should have a personal opinion") would rather be appropriate.

This is a fundamental difference. Let's first highlight three fundamental problematic points:

◆ **Obligation.** To be courageous or to be obliged. In the 18th century, you had to have the courage to have your own opinion, in the 21st century it is an obligation. So what happens to an opinion if in one case it takes courage to have it, and in the other, it is an obligation?

◆ **Ownership.** To be or to have. And yet now, just as in the 18th century, people have opinions. Both then and now, people considered the opinions they had as their own. So maybe it's about the category of "ownership"? What are "personal opinions" and can there be non-personal opinions?

◆ **Person.** To be or to appear. Courage is a category that applies to the holder of the opinion, rather than the opinion itself. The opinion may be the same, but one person needs the courage to have it, while the other is simply obliged to have it. So the distinction is about the person. The same opinion may be held by fundamentally different people, by different types of people. What is the difference between an eighteenth-century man, who needed the courage to have their own opinion, and a postmodern man, who is simply obliged to have one?

Here is the simplest example of these differences. There is a view that the Earth revolves around the Sun. Galileo Galilei once expressed this opinion in his own way before the Inquisition ("And yet it moves!"), and it is the same opinion that primary school teachers ram into their students.

The students are OBLIGED to share this opinion, or they will not get a good grade. Do they need the COURAGE to have such an opinion? Of course not. Teachers don't need courage either.

Galileo, on the other hand, absolutely needed courage, he risked his life to utter that opinion. Conversely, he was OBLIGED to hold a contrary opinion. Whose contrary opinion was it? It was the opinion of the church and science of the time. The members of the Inquisition tribunal had an opinion different from Galileo's. Was that opinion their own? Galileo insisted on his PERSONAL opinion, while they insisted on the opinion of the church, they represented the church in the debate with Galileo.

Whose opinion are teachers and good students promoting? Is it their own opinion or Galileo's opinion? Or perhaps, it is the opinion of modern science, and the teachers are its representatives who impose a non-personal opinion on their students?

The fact that the Earth revolves around the Sun is now accepted as a trite unquestionable truth. There is a small number of people who hold a contrary opinion. This contrary opinion does exist, those who have the true opinion are aware of it and consider it not to be true. Both opinions can't be equal in relation to the truth.

But now we are not dealing with truth *per se*, but with the courage to have or not have a personal opinion, no matter how true it is. Leaving objective truth beyond the scope, we cannot ignore the subjective conviction that our own opinion is true.

Actually, courage, within this framework, can be understood as the conviction that one's own opinion is true. This is the fourth fundamental problematic point:

◆ **Verity.** The subjective conviction that the opinion one believes to be personal is true: if there is no such conviction, a personal opinion is easily abandoned in favour of someone else's or some collective or majority opinion.

One more example from another situation and another era is relevant here. This situation is described in a vivid artistic form in Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon*. The Bolsheviks in the 1920s and 30s could not be reproached for their lack of personal courage. They underwent tsarist prisons and exile, demonstrated heroism during the Civil War, bravely faced death and risked their

own lives. They were often educated and intelligent people who held personal opinions. For those opinions, they could be prosecuted.

Galileo Galilei was tried by the Inquisition for his personal opinion, and Nikolai Bukharin was also tried for this by the Communist Party. This is where the similarity between the two situations ends, as the outcome is quite different. Galileo risked his life defending his personal opinion against that of the church. Bukharin acknowledged the opinion of the party to be true and was executed anyway. Moreover, he acknowledged the right of the party to execute him. That situation struck Arthur Koestler to the core, and he tried to make sense of it by describing the feelings and thoughts of his main character Nikolai Rubashov.

Koestler's protagonist, like his real-life prototypes, accepted only objective truth, and no subjective belief in the verity of his personal opinion is comparable to an authority that establishes objective truth. The Party was such an instance in Soviet times. The Party could not be wrong. But in Galileo's time, the Catholic Church was the same authority. Galileo dared to oppose his subjective conviction of what is true to the opinion of the institution which was empowered to establish objective truth. Bukharin and other Bolsheviks had no such courage.

Personal courage, readiness to risk one's life and heroism at war do not intersect with intellectual courage, with readiness to risk one's life for the subjective conviction of the verity of a personal opinion.

The Bolsheviks were ready to risk their lives for some values but were not prepared to pay a lower price for the truth since they had a conviction of the value of an opinion other than their own.

Hence the fifth fundamental problematic point:

◆ **Value.** An opinion acquires value in an act, and an act is the public presentation of a personal opinion with the conviction that it is true: how is it possible to value an opinion more than life? The risk of paying for a personal opinion with one's life is a rather extreme case. But the cost can be high without risking one's life. Prison is also a high cost, and so are ostracism, bullying, the contempt of others, or simply the loss of some benefits: a job, a degree, etc.

The value of an opinion is determined by the price one is ready to pay for the right to express it and announce it *urbi et orbi*. An opinion expressed without any risk is hardly worth much. An opinion that one is obliged to have or has under an obligation is worth almost nothing at all – in terms of neither verity nor ownership.

All these (and some other, not so important within our subject) fundamental problematic points can be described by one word: "*parrhesia*".

This term has been known since the times of Euripides. Greek philosophers, Roman thinkers, and Christian theologians have written and spoken about parrhesia, and it occupies an important place in *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola and Michel Foucault's *Care of the Self*. Michel Foucault, consistently and routinely developing the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, introduced the term "parrhesia" into modern usage and analysed the phenomenon in detail in his cycle of lectures, *The Courage of Truth*, which he delivered three months before his death.

The importance of the lectures for our subject (civil society) lies in the fact that in them, Michel Foucault talks about politics, power, democracy and their relation to truth. Here is a long but significant quote:

“You may recall that last year I undertook the analysis of this free-spokenness, of the practice of *parrhēsia*, and of the character able to employ *parrhēsia*, who is called the parrhesiast (*parrhēsiastēs*) – the word appears later. The study of *parrhēsia* and of the *parrhēsiastēs* in the culture of self in Antiquity is obviously a sort of prehistory of those practices which are organised and developed later around some famous couples: the penitent and the confessor, the person being guided and the spiritual director, the sick person and the psychiatrist, the patient and the psychoanalyst. It was, in a sense, this prehistory that I was trying to write.

Only then, while studying this parrhesiastic practice in this perspective, as the prehistory of these famous couples, I became aware again of something which rather surprised me and which I had not foreseen. Although *parrhēsia* is an important notion in the domain of spiritual direction, spiritual guidance, or soul counselling, and however important it may be in Hellenistic and Roman literature in particular, it is important to recognise that its origin lies elsewhere, that it is not essentially, fundamentally, or primarily in the practice of spiritual guidance that it emerges.

Last year I tried to show you that the notion of *parrhēsia* was first of all and fundamentally a political notion. And this analysis of *parrhēsia* as a political notion, as a political concept, clearly took me away somewhat from my immediate project: the ancient history of practices of telling the truth about oneself. However, on the other hand, this drawback was compensated for by the fact that by taking up again or undertaking the analysis of *parrhēsia* in the field of political practices, I drew a bit closer to a theme which, after all, has always been present in my analysis of the relations between the subject and truth: that of relations of power and their role in the interplay between the subject and truth. With the notion of *parrhēsia*, originally rooted in political practice and the problematisation of democracy, then later diverging towards the sphere of personal ethics and the formation of the moral subject, with this notion with political roots and its divergence into morality, we have, to put things very schematically – and this is what interested me, why I stopped to look at this and am still focusing on it – the possibility of posing the question of the subject and truth from the point of view of the practice of what could be called the government of oneself and others.”

What is important to us about this? The term parrhesia originated in Athenian democracy and referred to a simple citizen of the polis who spoke the truth in a popular assembly, regardless of how that truth was perceived by others, the majority or the rulers. One could pay for speaking the truth with his life or be subjected to ostracism – banishment.

The word later came to be used to refer to other forms of truth-telling at the risk of the speaker. It was these practices of parrhesia “in the domain of spiritual direction, spiritual guidance, or soul counselling” that caught Foucault’s initial attention. The political aspect of parrhesia was too obvious and not worthy of attention until Foucault came to understand “the possibility of posing the question of the subject and truth from the point of view of the practice of what could be called the government of oneself and others”.

In the subject of civil society the political aspect cannot be excluded in any way, but also “the question of the subject and truth from the point of view of the practice of what could be called the government of oneself and others” cannot be avoided.

It was easy for the ancient Greeks. For them, there was only private life and political life. Greek democracy was direct and immediate. Every citizen spoke for himself in a popular assembly and made personal decisions. Neither he nor his listeners had any doubts that he was guided solely by his personal opinion.

Parrhesia was not perceived as something exceptional but was opposed to demagoguery and the art of rhetoric. Every citizen of the polis understood that a specially trained orator had the purpose of changing the private (personal) opinion of his listeners to enlist them to some common opinion. A parrhesiast, on the other hand, is guided in his speech by a quite different motive, they cannot but tell the truth, it is their inner moral duty.

The only alternative to parrhesia is silence. The Greeks originally understood what modern people have to explain, as Kofi Annan did when he said: "All that evil needs to triumph is the silence of the majority". The courageous Greek parrhesiasts spoke the truth when the silence of all, or the lack of publicly presented truth, led to evil being perpetrated by the majority of the people. The Greeks did not need the concept of "civic courage", for personal and civic courage in direct democracy are the same thing.

In later times, parrhesia manifested itself in other, non-political situations, but which also demanded declaring the truth at the risk of death. This was the case for the already mentioned Galileo; it was the case for Martin Luther who took a stand against the sale of indulgences. So did many historical figures who dared to confront absolute monarchs, men who had absolute power over their lives and destiny. But these were not political acts, but moral ones.

This was not the case in the 18th century when representative democracy and civil society were emerging. The society of the 18th century was more complicated than the Athenian one. The educated people of that time had more knowledge and a deeper understanding of society. The social life of people in the 18th century ran beyond politics. There was private life and secular life. People of the late feudal epoch belonged to some estates and were members of various corporations, guilds, communities, sects or clubs. Each shared the views, goals and interests of the community with which they identified. Structured and strong communities had political interests that they tried to address by communicating with the authorities. It was not people with their personal opinions who entered into communication, but representatives of the interests and opinions of estates, guilds, corporations, churches, and later clubs and parties.

Practices of representation had already existed for several centuries. Lawyers represented the interests of their clients. Diplomats promoted the interests of their monarchs and broadcast their opinions, keeping their own to themselves. Scientists spoke in the name of truth. Delegates to deliberative bodies under monarchs (sejms, general states, parliaments) represented the interests of their estates or regions.

Accordingly, figures of speech appeared, which were resorted to when voicing the opinion of certain institutions, instances, collectives and communities, rather than a personal one. This is how the first person plural form of speech has taken root among scientists. The scholar says "we" where the ancient philosophers would say "I", "you", "they". They would use "we" properly, as Aristotle did: "We want to investigate the nature of the soul, and *I* mean...".

To give meaning and importance to their words, everyone began to declare: “I speak on behalf of all the merchants of our city” or “I represent here the nobility of so-and-so province”. In grotesque form, it sounds like this: “Not for profit, but only by the will of the one who sent me”.

It is always easier to express a general opinion, to say what someone has said, to refer to the fact that you have been delegated for a certain thing than to formulate your own opinion and attitude to anything.

In the representative bodies of the absolutist era, personal opinion meant and was worth very little. Even the archaic *liberum veto* was no exception to this rule. One delegate of the sejm could stop the debates and block any decision, not in his name, but as a representative of his town or region.

Any representative of anything could not be free, could not have their own opinion, as they were entrusted with broadcasting and proclaiming a very definite message. They are obliged to have this opinion of the collective, the community, the client, etc., and to keep their personal opinion to themselves.

But such a principle of representation contradicts all the declared principles of democracy. On the one hand, the “representative” is OBLIGED to adhere to the opinion which they are entrusted to represent, on the other hand, they SHOULD have their own opinion as a free citizen and person.

And what is to be done when the opinion they are OBLIGED to hold conflicts with the one they SHOULD hold as a free reasonable person? This is precisely the kind of case where civic courage and parrhesia are needed:

- ◆ *Jeder muss den Mut zu seiner Meinung haben* (Everyone must have the courage to have a personal opinion).
- ◆ You need to BE courageous and you have to HAVE your own opinion, not the one which is required by the group, party, community which sent you in, etc.
- ◆ You must have critical thinking to distinguish your own opinion from that which is entrusted to you from the outside and to distinguish between what is true and what is not.
- ◆ You have to have subjective certainty in the ability of critical thinking to establish objective truth, instead of trusting its establishment to external instances, and to have subjective certainty in this established truth.
- ◆ You need to value truth and true opinion more than the benefits that can come from abandoning true opinion in the form of community recognition, rewards and bonuses resulting from representing collective interests and other people’s opinions.

Understanding this, we can separate parrhesia and civic courage.

There is no civic courage without parrhesia. Civic courage is parrhesia manifested in special situations, when a citizen takes part in politics, i.e. in dealing with general issues and not just their personal ones.

It takes a lot of courage for a person who has decided to get rid of alcohol addiction to come to an Alcoholics Anonymous club and introduce himself: “Hello! My name is Peter and I am an alcoholic!” But that’s not civil courage yet.

Coming out also takes a lot of courage. Now the term is most often used in certain situations – declaring one’s non-traditional sexual orientation. But declaring yourself an atheist in a religious community is pretty much the same thing. In the USSR, declaring that you don’t share communist views was the same thing.

That’s all courage, but it’s not civil courage.

Civil society begins with parrhesia, with the civic courage of the parrhesiast who speaks of the society to which they belong, rather than of themselves.

A free citizen endowed with critical thinking commits an act of parrhesia by proclaiming ideas that are not shared by the majority, that contradict the attitudes of the authorities, and they risk their life and freedom, they can be punished by the contempt of the majority and exclusion from society.

Other free citizens endowed with critical thinking and having enough courage to reconsider the opinions and views imposed on them by corporations, parties, the whole society, and the whole nation, can accept the truth communicated by the parrhesiast and join them. These citizens become civil society.

If the act of parrhesia succeeds and the new idea proclaimed by the parrhesiast becomes the domain of a broad civil society, it changes the whole society and develops it. A particular opinion or idea, the verity of which was based only on the subjective conviction of a courageous citizen, takes hold of the masses and becomes trivial, becoming the common opinion of the majority.

And so it goes until the next act of parrhesia.

Civil society in Belarus does exist. And there are several ideas which are already known from the acts of parrhesia that should change our society as a whole and lead to the reset of the state.

1. Fresh Wind is a public campaign that was launched on 31 August 2019 as a reaction to the drafting by the governments of Belarus and Russia of agreements on “deeper integration” of the two countries and changes to the Belarusian constitution that could jeopardise the country’s sovereignty: <https://канстытуцыя.бел/>

2. In 1994, Matskevich put forward the formula “To think Belarus” as a goal to comprehend Belarus not just as a subject of study and description, but as a *unique self-sufficient* object, requiring an appropriate attitude and background from the researcher: <https://eurobelarus.info/news/society/1994/12/12/dumat-belarus.html>

3. Matskevich U. *Vopreki ochevidnosti* [Contrary to the evidence]. *Nevsky prostor*, 2006, p. 29.

4. “In autumn 2006, there was a high-profile conflict between the city authorities and the Full Gospel Christians of the New Life Church in Minsk. The land between Malinauka and Sukharava neighbourhood units became part of the development plan. Minsk City Executive Committee decided to deprive the congregation of the land and the building, which it had bought from a collective farm. In protest, the believers went on an open-ended hunger strike. Methodologist Matskevich, believing that the case does not only concern parishioners, joined the hunger strike. He was seriously set on it – as he told me later, they were ‘really ready to die’. Back then the believers and the public defended the church. (...) [As a result,] the authorities cancelled 11 decisions of the economic court in the New Life Church case”. ([Belarussky zhurnal](#)).

5. See *Obschestvenny dialog v Belarusi: ot narodovlastiya k grazhdanskomu uchastiyu* [Public dialogue in Belarus: from people’s power to civic participation] / Uladzimir Matskevich, 2012, pp. 48-54. ([Eurobelarus](#)).

6. NGO is a non-governmental organisation – an organisation set up by individuals, or other organisations not affiliated with the government. NGOs do not carry out commercial activities, so they are often referred to as “non-profit organisations” (NPO).

7. *Mozhet li NGO, ili “tretiy sektor”, obkhoditsa bez grazhdanskogo obschestva?* [Can NGOs, or the “third sector”, do without civil society?] / Uladzimir Matskevich, 2014. ([Methodology.by](#)).

8. *Milliony poslushnykh protiv millionov nesoglasnykh. Kto okazhetsya silnee?* [Millions of obedient vs. millions of non-content. Who will turn out to be stronger?] / Uladzimir Matskevich. ([Belarussky zhurnal](#)).