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Jewish minority in the Republic of Belarus after 1991

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Summary doctoral dissertation

The subject of the hearing was the Jewish minority in the Republic of Belarus. The analysis covered a broad spectrum of issues, in particular the legal status of this minority under the external and internal law and matters of shaping and development of national life within the community. An important goal was to familiarize the origins of the Jewish communities and their numbers, description of the structure of social, cultural, educational and religious activities. It was important to show the state of relations of the Jewish minority with Belarusian and Israeli states and examine the support provided to the Belarusian Jews from the international community, mainly foreign foundations and organizations. The study was aimed to estimate the possibility of the development of national-cultural autonomy of the Jewish minority and advocated by some representatives of the Belarusian authorities' policy of assimilation of minorities.

In relation to the information appearing in the sources of government and official politicians statements, in the area of Belarus there is no evidence confirming the occurrence of conflicts on the nature of ethnic background or nationality. It is in vain to look for the more active organizations, associations and groups that their programs would have entered hostile racial or nationalist slogans. As emphasized by policy makers, specific cases and references to individual incidents (such as assault on foreigners or agitation of a chauvinistic and xenophobic background) do not constitute the appearance of Belarus in the described phenomenon and problem with the characteristics of the ethnic conflict.

After gaining independence, Belarus has revived the activities of representatives of national minorities, including the Jewish minority. The activity of Belarusian Jewrom that time is oriented on social, cultural, educational and religious publishing, not having yet the implications and political nature. It is worth noting that the dynamic development of the Jewish community determine issues such as the declining group size (unfavorable demographic processes and progressive emigration), lack of support from the government, lack of a strong group of representatives within the community (apart from the community

leaders), dependence on external, foreign sources financing. Government policy towards the Jewish minority does not differ from the general direction of policy towards minorities living in the country. Moreover, the authorities do not limit the initiatives of the representatives of Jewish minority in such a way as it does to the activities of Polish minority.

Analyzing the internal situation it should be noted that despite the lack of official, state anti-Semitism, reaches its manifestations - anti-Semitic slogans appear occasionally in the statements of politicians or official public communications. Still anti-Semitic publications occur, there are also acts of hooliganism and vandalism that perpetrators are usually not called to criminal responsibility. Jewish organizations utilize emerging anti-Semitic acts as a means to exert pressure on the authorities and the element promoting its image and emphasize commitment to community development. On the other hand, despite some actions by the authorities such as the demolition of buildings of former synagogues, the Jewish minority remains loyal to the government. A sensitive issue still remains property restitution, seized in the Soviet period. Despite the appeals of the Jewish community, the buildings of former synagogues are not returned, and in areas such as cemeteries residential and public buildings are constructed.

A significant problem for the Jewish community is issue of the victims of the Holocaust commemoration. As a result of the Holocaust about 95% of Jews who remained in the occupied territory died. Allegations of the Jewish community to the authorities concerned underreporting the number of victims and their lack of commemoration. In addition, the commonly encountered practice to recognize the Holocaust as a synonym for genocide, which according to the Jews is tantamount to a denial of its unique character, associated with the destruction of one nation - the Jewish (as the Holocaust, under the direction of defining and according to the authorities, the Armenian genocide and massacres in Rwanda could be called as such). Jewish activists also raise another problem - the lack of information on the extent of the Holocaust in encyclopedias and textbooks. In Belarus, the failure of reporting of the contribution of Jewish soldiers and partisans in the fight against the occupier as well as information about ghettos (there were over 250) and places of mass murder. The problem is commemorating places of torture, murder, executions, etc. The lack of common public knowledge about the Holocaust and the contribution of Belarusian Jews in the Great Patriotic War intensify efforts of Jewish groups to popularize among the Belarusian society of knowledge about the Holocaust.

Due to the fact that education and learning play an important role for the Jews, the nature of the activities developed by the Jewish community structures and organizations

in a wide extent been associated with educational activities and training. Supporting public education of minorities and the creation of educational projects is one of the priority areas included in the program, among others, dynamically working organization - the Union of Belarusian Jewish Associations and Communities (the ros. *Союз белорусских еврейских общественных объединений и общин*, in short: СБЕООО). The Jewish community set up a system of complementary informal training for children and young people of Jewish origin. An example of such structures considered to be mentioned in the hearing Sunday schools. These places are involved in creating the conditions for learning the Hebrew language, otherwise the transfer of knowledge concerning the history and culture historical homeland – Israel in a special and fruitful way. In addition to the sphere of education, the employees of such institutions work for the integration of minorities.

Noting the current situation on the level of education and the development of Jewish studies it should be stated that for higher education in Belarus, analyzed in terms of the Jewish matter, lack of a broad trend of research and researchers dealing with "Jewish subject matter" is characteristic, which results in a small range of research. Problematic is also the low level of public interest in studies in the field of Jewish studies. On the other hand, we should mention the initiatives of a small group of researchers, through which Jewish studies could appear in the sphere of science and allows the establishment of cooperation with other research centers (eg. With institutions in Moscow and Vilnius).

Jewish publishing in Belarus lacks sufficient funding. This contributes essentially to the limited number of published titles and magazines low effort appearing. It should be noted, that this difficult situation is affected by is small number of recipients. Little public demand and interest in Jewish publishers result in turn dim range of publishing operations and reducing their frequency of appearance.

It is worth noting that as a result of policy makers from the Soviet era who fought against the manifestations of Jewish national life and religious, many Belarusian Jews feel no bond with his people not identifying well with its traditions and culture. For this reason it is crucial to consider any operation like workshops, seminars and educational programs run by a very well-prepared teachers and educators.

Fastest-acting organization remains since 1991. СБЕООО, already mentioned. In addition there are other organizations such as the Union of Jewish Communities in the Republic of Belarus (ОИРОБ), the Jewish Religious Union of Belarus (ИРОБ) and the Religious Association of Municipalities Progressive Judaism. Their work, which should be noted is possible with a big support from the outside, coming mainly from the Joint,

Sochnut the Israeli Centre for Culture and Information.

Generally, the interest of "the Jewish subject of matter", dating from the creation of an independent state, in contrast even to the realities of Polish and development of Jewish life in Poland, takes place in the Republic slowly and on a smaller scale. Jewish activists, though just few, grouped in organizations and associations, put a lot of effort into communication to the public knowledge of both the position Jewish of in period of the Byelorussian SSR, as well as their role in World War II (an issue which remained completely ignored in official curricula until recent times, and it is one of the cornerstones of the activities of the Jewish community), but face many difficulties, both internal nature and associated with state policy. The problem of the return of Jewish property is the scene of disputes with the authorities. Many seized by the state buildings and lands, previously owned by the Jewish community, is currently used by the public, such as Synagogue in Brest, acting as a movie theater, or the area of the former cemetery in Minsk, on which the stadium was built. Although there are places with the status of national monuments (eg. A synagogue in Minsk, Bobruisk, Borisov and Grodno), but the list of objects require support and restaurants is very long. It is also an area that requires contribution and commitment of Jewish activists in order to improve the existing situation.

Due to the lack of public interest in the protection of Jewish heritage and small financial outlays, the issues of position of the Jews and their concern for the promotion of Jewish history and culture, events War II and the Holocaust as well as desire to recover and restor Jewish property occur in a complex way, even more slowly than in other countries. It is worth noting a noticeable process of a gradual increase in the number of initiatives aimed at adequate protection of the material achievements of the Jews (eg. Open in 2002. Museum of Jewish History and Culture of Belarus in Minsk and the specific opening part of the society to "Jewish history lesson").

To sum up, changed political conditions (in comparison to Soviet times) were a factor that enable the development of socio-cultural life and integration within the Jewish community. It should again be noted that the loss of Jewish people is unfavorable condition for the scale and opportunities for socio-cultural community evolution, but does not exclude it. Activities and manifestations of the members of the Jewish minority are to a very large extent determined by external support (from foreign foundations, organizations and individuals). The most important donors - subjects of international law, to support the activities of Belarusian Jewish activists among Israel and the United States and Russia. Strong financial support is from the numerous international foundations and organizations. Following

may be mentioned, among others, cited in the dissertation like Committee *Joint*, organization Sefer, Sochnut, the World Jewish Congress, the European Jewish Congress, American Jewish Congress, the Swiss Committee Soviet Jews, the Association of immigrants from Belarus in Israel, the Association of Russian immigrants in the United States, in addition to the fund "Claims Conference" Lauder Foundation and Fund "Israeli Family".

The Jewish minority does not play a significant role in Belarus. This is due to several factors: low and declining Jewish population, lack of interest of the authorities in providing its support, "personalized" nature of the structures that are created, dependence on external funding. Weakness of created and operating Jewish structures is the lack of adequate support from the state and the full dependence on the decisions of government.

Maintained over the years in Belarus Sovietization associated with the expansion of the Russian language, and then after the takeover of power by Lukashenka, the tendency to strengthen the Russification through the continuation of many sovietism elements, does not create conditions for the free development of grassroots civic initiatives and the broad possibilities of action in Belarus institutions and programs developed by activists minority communities, including the Jewish minority.

Too often the Belarusian authorities in the analysis of contemporary national relations the points at an extremely stable situation and peaceful relations between representatives of various ethnic groups living in Belarus. Indeed, to some extent, do justice to this claim, because this is an area where there were times (after the war) with no serious ethnic conflicts. This does not change the fact that more and more often there are cases of aggressive behavior and offenses against representatives of national minorities. It can be expected that the exercise of power by the current president and the absence of any changes in internal policy issues will help to progressively reduce the possibility of Jewish activist, mainly due to poor funding programs and shrinking possibility of obtaining greater support from the outside as well as strong tendency to assimilation. It is difficult to predict whether it is possible to change the internal situation, as a consequence of the development of Belarusian policy makers towards the West. The steps of the Belarusian president and the ruling camp observed so far were not clear enough to allow to make a diagnosis as to the future development of the strategy plans for the minority communities in Belarus. Some kind of warming to the Jewish minority, mentioned in the pages of the trial, was not long enough to successfully argued for its continued positive impact on the situation of Jews in Belarus and possible profitach in the form of, among others, opportunities to develop their own social-cultural autonomy. Opening to international cooperation, the lifting of restrictions on the funding opportunities

and providing support substantive and technical representatives of the Jewish minority in Belarus would undoubtedly be an important asset that enhances the development opportunities of socio-cultural heritage of Belarusian Jews. Today, however, it is difficult to trace the activities of government intentions to change domestic policy towards national minorities.

While analyzing the situation of Jews in Belarus it should be noted that small positive changes at the level of public perceived and recorded (for example - the participation of representatives of state in the celebration of anniversaries relevant to the history of Jews in Belarus or positive statements by politicians about the Jewish minority). You can explain them as manifestations of liberalization in the treatment of the "Jewish subject matter" primarily related to the intention to improve the image of the government in the internal arena, especially in an international environment.

Generally, in terms of demographics, the Belarusian Jews the end of the XX century and the beginning of XXI century is not optimistic. The results obtained as a result of census carried out in 2009 confirmed the irreversible loss of the Jewish population and the continuous decline in its numbers. It can be assumed that the results of the next demographic census, scheduled for 2019, will also not change this trend. Jewish minority will be focused in the larger cities (mostly in the capital city of the country), and the decline of the Jews (as a result of the low birth rate, migration, difficulties in the framework of the integration and maintenance of Jewish identity in the face of advanced processes of assimilation) will continue, which will undoubtedly not improve the situation of Jews in Belarus.