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## “THE THIRD SECTOR” IN BELARUSIAN REGIONS: HOW TO MAKE WESTERN AID EFFECTIVE?

In the second half of 1998 the situation in Belarus was marked by two negative trends: economic situation in the country was worsening and President Lukashenka was trying to tighten his control over society. In 1999 re-registration of NGOs planned by the regime could create additional problems for NGO sector, especially in the regions (as a lot of NGOs are concentrated in Minsk where they have more possibilities for defending themselves). Thus, the main focus of this presentation is situation in Belarusian regions. The paper was prepared within the project held by the EastWest Institute and is based on the results of the trips of the author made in Fall 1998 to Minsk and two regions (oblast): Hrodno oblast in Western Belarus and Homel oblast in Eastern Belarus.

### 1. NGOs IN THE REGIONS

Observers and experts from the West sometimes could not even imagine how difficult is to work in Belarusian province. In district (*rayon*) cities the situation for NGOs is even more difficult than in oblast centers, not to say of Minsk. For example, in Lida (Hrodno oblast) democratic NGOs until recently even did not have an office to meet. In Svetlogorsk (Homel oblast) democratic NGOs have computer, fax, xerox (they received some support from NGOs in Minsk). However, in another rayon center of Homel region — Zhlobin — there is no office to meet. Zhlobin club of electors was deprived of the office it had; local organization of Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) has not even typing machine. In another rayon center — Rogachev — the situation is even worse than in Zhlobin. NGOs have computer, but no printer and xerox.

Despite this situation, regional NGOs demonstrated ability to work and even to show examples to the capital. A very positive development is the recent creation of “Hrodno Initiative” in Fall 1998 headed by former democratic governor of oblast Semen Domash. It united parties, trade unions, NGOs, including such influential in Hrodno region

as Union of Poles. It is important to notice that in Hrodno the “democratic” (moderate, intellectual) wing within BPF is very influential, and representatives of this wing stress that radical BPF leader Zenon Pazniak discredits BPF. At the same time, Domash is viewed in Hrodno as one of the candidate from opposition during presidential elections. Small business in Hrodno and Brest is developed better than in other regions. All this factors seem to support those who view Hrodno as a “starting place” for uniting democratic forces (though in Minsk opposition politicians are afraid of Domash as potential competitor). In the regions BPF and law defense movement Charter-97 cooperate which is a positive sign as well. In general, in the regions there are no such dividing lines within democratic opposition as in Minsk. If other regions follow Hrodno example, new movement “Regional Belarus” could be created and Minsk politicians could follow this way as well.

One of the main cities of Hrodno region is Lida, which sometimes is called as “Belarusian Lviv”. At schools around 50 % of first classes and 70 % of classes in general are still taught in Belarusian: it is better than in Hrodno. Stanislav Sudnik, leader of BPF in Lida and former Lieutenant Colonel of Soviet Army, “saved” “Nashe Slovo” (“Our Word”), the newspaper of Society for Belarusian language, which was published in Minsk and now is being published in Lida. Alliance “Democratic Lida” was organized (though not registered officially). The main force in it is BPF which, despite the fact that now it is weakened, remained the most organized force within the opposition.

Therefore, there is a potential for positive development in the regions. However, as it was mentioned above, even in Lida, not to say of smaller rayon centers and cities, NGOs face a lot of problems. Below we would like to summarize some of them:

— One of the main problems is the lack of information. There is the need for more newspapers,

newsletters (though it is understandable that not all of them will survive), and simply informational leaflets. There is also great need for Internet, e-mail, as well as permanent analytical assessment of the development of the “third sector” in the regions;

— Some rayon branches of the members of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs (below I will refer to it as “the Assembly”) would prefer to contact directly with foreign partners, not through the central office of their organization in Minsk;

— The idea of city twinning between Western cities and small rayon cities in Belarus could be discussed;

— It is important for Western foundations to work with non-registered NGOs and even with initiative groups.

— In oblast centers seminars for NGOs, perhaps, are not as needed as it was earlier, but in the rayons they are becoming an important mean for drawing people together;

— It is important to create such resource centers in rayons that each of them could serve 2—3 rayon centers.

## 2. RESOURCE CENTERS

Important step in the development of resource centers was the creation of Association of Resource Centers in February 1998. It united 5 regional resource centers under the roof of the Assembly. Now they are going to submit the common project for financing resource centers in the rayons.

Nevertheless, in the activity of resource centers there are certain problems. Some of them were summarized at the II Congress of the Assembly (November 1998) in the presentation of Elena Kuzminich, head of Minsk-based resource center “United Way”. According to her, many people, even in the hall where the Congress was held, do not understand what “resource center” means. There is a need for educational programs for resource centers. Some centers do not have enough prerequisites (informational base, equipment, and professionals) to be considered as “real” resource center. There are insecure trends in their activity. Some leaders do not understand that resource centers are temporary and their function is to help other NGOs to become sustainable. It would be dangerous if resource centers decide who could receive information and who could not. When Western donors invite resource centers to solve financial questions (to divide grants), it could undermine trust to them from local NGOs. Really, there is certain mistrust to resource centers.

Kuzminich proposed to develop a kind of “ethical code” of resource centers, which stresses that resource centers share all the information they have. This proposal was supported and generalized by Miroslav Kobasa, head of Sapieha Foundation: it

is important to have a kind of ethical code for all NGOs, according to which they should not try to discredit each other, especially while dealing with donors.

Nowadays in every region there are 2—4 organizations which are describing themselves as resource centers. In some regions relations among them are good, in some — they are tense.

In Hrodno there is the strong leader — “Ratusha”. Emerging center is “Rada-23” — regional amalgamation of youth organizations (mostly they are non-political, but Social-Democratic “Malada Hramada” is included as well). Another organization “Third Sector” is planning to become resource center in the informational sphere. “Ratusha” leader Ales’ Milinkevich support their desire to become resource centers. He is sure that it is good to have several centers in every region: everyone will have its own specifics. Large “monopolistic” centers, according to him, are unnecessary.

However, in Homel situation is different. There are three resource centers: “Civic Initiatives”; “Oracul”, a think tank; and Homel regional branch of “Children of Chernobyl” (not to confuse with Fund “For the Children of Chernobyl”). Relations among them are a bit tense, resembling the situation in Minsk. Among them “Civic Initiatives” is the most socially active. It is led by members of United Civic Party, which sometimes is used in official propaganda against this center, as it could be viewed as a wing of this party.

In this situation, it seems to be worthwhile to discuss the following: when there are meetings in Minsk between Western foundations and Belarusian resource centers on the questions of providing grants, it is important to have at least 2 representatives from regions. It will help to avoid accusations of certain resource centers in “monopolization” of information. At the regional level 5—6 representatives could be selected to create a local consulting board to divide grants in the region.

While the support to the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs should be continued, the main accent is to be shifted to regions. Oblast assemblies are becoming, perhaps, even more important than “central” bodies of the Assembly, though now they are a bit amorphous. But the main focus should be directed to local NGOs in the regions where concrete work is done. While the Assembly remains the main, though not the only force, within NGO sector in Belarus, bodies of the Assembly based in Minsk should not be the only channel of distribution of grants to NGO sector.

## 3. NECESSITY OF SUPPORT TO BELARUSIAN CULTURE

The results of the policy of authorities towards Belarusian culture and language could be easily seen

in Hrodno where Belarusian language is used wider than in the country as a whole. According to the data provided by Milinkevich, in 1990 there were no Belarusian classes in Hrodno; in 1994 — 75 % of the first, second, and third classes were taught in Belarusian. However, in 1998 there are no first Belarusian classes in Hrodno at all (!).

Vincuk Viachorka, deputy head of the BPF and one of the leaders of the "moderate" wing of BPF, stressed at the II Congress of the Assembly: as the state is hostile to the development of national culture, these functions should be played by the "third sector". At the same Congress, Khristophor Zheliapov, leader of the resource center from Russian-speaking Vitebsk, spoke in Russian that "support for Belarusianess = support for democracy". Really, it is widely recognized that to speak Belarusian in Minsk is to make a political choice.

That is why, it is especially important to work in the sphere of culture, and especially **local history studies**: it is much easier to work in the regions in this sphere than to conduct training in semi-political issues. One of the possible ways to promote Belarusian culture is support of Belarusian language and culture at schools. Very effective are rock-concerts of Belarusian groups or discotheques in Belarusian language. Unfortunately, even democrats neglect sometimes cultural sphere: independent theater in Homel led by democrats did not have any performance in Belarusian.

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR WESTERN FOUNDATIONS

Some Western foundations try to react quickly to the situation in Belarus. For example, Eurasia Foundation has "open doors" policy and discusses proposals every 2 months. However, one of the main problem for Belarusian NGOs is the receiving of grants on legal bank accounts as 2/3 of the grant will go to the regime. Semen Domash stress: it is the paradox when grant to monitor human rights will help, in fact, the authorities. Most NGOs prefer to work through accounts of mediators abroad. The cooperation should be developed with Ukrainian and Lithuanian NGOs. In this regard, Ukrainian-Belarusian projects supported by Soros and Eurasia Foundations are good examples.

One of the solutions is to buy equipment for NGOs and to increase the number of small grants. In this regard, NGO activists appreciated the experience of Counterpart and USIS. It was stressed that USIS is rather quick in responding to grant proposals. USIS Program "Community Con-

nections" is important in promoting connections with Western partners at regional level. Counterpart has also recognized the importance of small grants. Now it has trainers in every oblast center.

Another problem is the opening of representative offices of Western foundations in Minsk. Though such steps are of great importance, nevertheless, they will lead to: 1) wasting a lot of money, because of the problems with taxation and currency exchange; 2) compromising with the authorities. In this situation, it seems better to have just a representative person, not a representative office.

It is widely recognized that effectiveness of the grants in the regions is much better than in Minsk. It is understandable that increasing amount of small grants will create additional inconveniences for foundations. Therefore, it is important for Western representatives to visit regions, especially rayons, to know people and organizations whom they could trust. Meanwhile, foreign representatives usually limit themselves to oblast centers and do not attend rayons (with a few exceptions).

The grants should integrate forces and should be directed to involving more people in NGO activity. It is important to have the reserves of grants on the local level in order not to waste time for application procedure in case of emergency. Respected people from NGOs in the regions will distribute the grants in case of necessity.

NGOs in the regions stress that information on grants often comes in the last minute and they have no time to submit proposal. Quarterly magazine "Grants" published by "SCAF" center in Minsk is sometimes "too methodological" while NGOs are to be informed quickly on new grants. Therefore, it is important to spread new information even before publishing it in the newsletters.

A lot of NGO leaders stress importance of support for non-traditional activities which is very effective but which is not usually supported by Western foundations: for example, rock-concerts, pickets, **informational** leaflets. Pickets could be "informational" as well. They should not call for overthrowing regime, but, for example, could inform what is happening in Belarusian economy in general, and in the concrete city, in particular.

In general, the main directions of the activity of Western foundations in Belarus could be: independent mass media; NGO development in the regions; support in cultural and patriotic education, which is often neglected by Western foundations.

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## **БІЛОРУСЬКИЙ “ТРЕТІЙ СЕКТОР” НА ОБЛАСНОМУ РІВНІ: ЯК ЗРОБИТИ ЕФЕКТИВНОЮ ЗАХІДНУ ДОПОМОГУ?**

На прикладі аналізу ситуації у Гродненській та Гомельській областях (відповідно — Західна та Східна Білорусь) формулюються конкретні рекомендації щодо підвищення ефективності західної допомоги білоруським недержавним організаціям (НДО). Підкреслюється, що умови роботи НДО у регіонах є набагато важчими, ніж у Мінську, зате й ефект від їхньої роботи може бути більшим. Аналізується роль ресурсних центрів у регіонах. Робиться висновок, що західні фундації поки що не приділяють належної уваги підтримці білоруської культури.