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THE THIRD SECTOR IN HOMEL — AN ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION

I. HISTORY OF THE THIRD SECTOR IN THE HOMEL REGION

The third sector in its present form began to develop in the Homel region in mid-1980s and early 1990s. As in other parts of the USSR, one of the main factors that led to increased social activity was the growth in national self-awareness and the desire by a large portion of the population to restore the historical record. Perhaps, the first non-governmental organisation in the region with a more or less distinct goal was the historical and cultural association "Talaka," established in 1995. The relatively liberal political situation at that time and the wave of election campaigns of 1989–1990 was conducive for increased social activity and restructuring society.

However, the major cause for intensive development of the third sector in the Homel region was the Chernobyl disaster. A wave of strikes and rallies swept through the most effected districts and the city of Homel in the summer and autumn of 1989. Those actions became a kind of instrument of civil control over the authorities, not limited by Chernobyl-related issues. It is characteristic that the Homel region stood out from the other regions in Belarus in terms of civil activity.

Mass protest actions soon initiated the founding of non-governmental organisations, among which were The Voters Club (actually the first officially registered structure resulting from a grass roots initiative), "Protection from the Atom," and "Children of Chernobyl." The relatively democratic local elections in 1990 facilitated this process. The newly emerged non-governmental associations campaigned for their candidates, resulting in democratic factions or groups, among others in Rechyt'sa, Zhlobin and Loyev, having a presence in the representative bodies of power. In Homel, the Voters Club even won the election.

These factors resulted in the rapid development of civic initiatives in very diverse areas of activity. Between 1991 and 1994, there were approximately 200 initiatives. This period remains the most favourable for non-governmental organisations in terms of co-operation with the authorities, local businesses, media and the general population.

II. SPECIFIC NATURE AND PROBLEMS OF NGOS IN THE HOMEL REGION

Analysing the structure of the third sector in the Homel region, it can be seen that Chernobyl remains a very specific and very essential factor. However, being the main stimulus of civil activity in late 1980s and early 1990s, its importance gradually waned in middle and particularly in the late 1990s. From 1989 to 1999 the re-

gion's population declined 120,000 (i.e., nearly 10%). The decline in the population was greater in more contaminated districts. For example, on February 2, 1999, the population of the Khoyniki district was 68.5% of that in 1989, Brahlin district 66.7%, Chacherski district 65.2%, Vetkauski district 60.7%, Naroula district 59% and the region was a whole 92.6% (according to the regional department of statistics).

Generally, the most active people were the first to abandon the unsafe radioactive areas (which, to some extent, meant the entire region). This included young people, able to adapt to new places, the intelligentsia as well as highly qualified white- and blue-collar workers. It is from these groups that most social activists originate.

The region's administration encouraged emigrants from the "hot spots" in Russia and other ex-Soviet republics to settle in the abandoned areas. Many settlements in the region today have virtually no indigenous inhabitants and those that do remain are largely pensioners. The lack of tradition and continuity has almost completely halted the development of civic processes in those areas that appear to be vast "civic deserts." In my opinion, this is the main reason for the relative weakness of the region's third sector.

Despite the above, the activity of non-governmental organisations in the region is gradually increasing. Since 1997, the share of Homel region NGOs in Belarus' third sector has been increasing. In 1997, they constituted a mere 6% of all NGOs registered in Belarus, increasing to 11% in 1998 and to 11.3% in 2000 (according to United Way data). Moreover, this period includes the infamous campaign of reregistering non-governmental organisations that reduced the number of NGOs in the Homel region from 281 on February 2, 1998 to 196 on June 1, 2000. Non-governmental organisations were completely eliminated in some of the districts. At present, 9 out of 21 administrative units of the region have no NGOs. The situation is not quite as bleak when considering non-registered NGOs, but their possibilities and abilities to operate are extremely limited by the political and legislative conditions in Belarus. For example, non-registered NGOs may not fully participate in election campaigns (delegate observers or representatives to electoral commissions) or legally rent office space or venues for their activities. Moreover, according to legislation adopted in 1999, they are officially banned. Any form of promoting their activities is liable to punishment.

Regardless of these difficulties, non-unregistered initiative groups are frequently active and influential in their areas. Many of these groups have gained the respect of the local population. The following are the main reasons that hinder organisations from acquiring legal personality:

- The problem of obtaining a legal address: an organisation may not be registered at a home address, while almost all administrative premises are owned by the state;
- The requirement of an extremely high minimum number of founding members;
- Difficulties associated with holding a founding assembly and producing various documents;
- Financial problems. The entire registration process costs approximately 100 USD. In Belarusian conditions, this is a significant sum for an operating NGO, not to mention an initiative group.

Registration offices frequently refuse to register non-governmental organisations for no reason at all, using any formal pretext such as “specified areas of activity unclear” or “statutory provisions unclear,” etc. Some organisations have been refused registration because, in the opinion of the registering authority “the name does not correspond to the statute activity of the organisation being founded.”

III. STRUCTURE OF THE THIRD SECTOR IN THE HOMEL REGION. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS.

As of June 1, 2000, the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Justice of the Homel regional administration had registered 196 non-governmental organisations, including:

- 3 international organisations;
- 1 national organisation;
- 6 branch structures of national organisations;
- 38 regional organisations;
- 148 city, district, cross-district and other organisations.

For a more comprehensive and objective evaluation of the Homel region's third sector, at least 76 of the more well known and influential non-registered initiative groups should be added to this number. Therefore, for purposes of analysis, there are 272 non-governmental organisations operating in the Homel region.

Non-governmental organisations are very unevenly distributed among the administrative divisions of the region. More than 70% are concentrated in Homel, the regional centre, the population of which comprises only 30% of the region's population. As throughout the country, social activity manifests itself mostly in larger towns such as Mozyr, Svetlahorsk,



*“The Chernobyl ‘Way,’” Minsk, April 26th, 2000.
Photo: IREX/ProMedia*

Rechytza or Zhlobin. A total of 12 organisations (4.5%) operate in the countryside, only 5 of which are registered with the Ministry of Justice. The rural population currently comprises 31% of the total population of the region. It is interesting to note that along with Homel the highest rates of NGOs *per capita* are in the district of Loyev and the towns of Svetlahorsk and Rechytza.

In terms of areas of activity, the Homel region differs from the other regions of Belarus and from the country as a whole, primarily in regard to the share of Chernobyl-related and volunteer organisations.

The number of Chernobyl-related and volunteer non-governmental organisations in the Homel region compared to other regions

Organisations (percent of total number)	Region							
	Berastsye region	Vitsebsk region	Horadnya region	Mahylou region	Minsk region	Minsk city	Belarus	Homel region
Chernobyl- related organisations	2,19	1,05	1,13	3,8	2,12	1,98	2,8	10,17
Volunteer organisations	5,13	7,72	4,51	7,6	7,94	7,99	8,32	16,93

As for areas of activity, most non-registered NGOs are engaged in human rights protection, local area studies, dissemination of information or serve as resource centres (see charts 3 and 4). This suggests that organisations engaged in these types of activities are currently the most difficult to register. Local area studies and publishing initiatives are separate categories in chart 4 due to the large number of them currently operating in the region. Considering the fact that these publishing initiatives do not intend to become commercial projects in the future and the collection, processing and dissemination of information are social activities, these organisations are considered pure non-governmental organisations.

Among the most well known non-governmental organisations in the region, distinguished by their high level of activity, original programmes, broad networks and influence on social processes occurring in their local communities, the following should be mentioned:

- **social organisations:** the Homel city "Association of Families of Children with Cerebral Paralysis and Spinal Pathologies," the Homel regional non-governmental organisation "Children's Haematology," the non-governmental organisation "The Homel

Regional Centre for Socio-Psychological Support "Spirituality";

- **Chernobyl-related and volunteer organisations:** the Homel regional foundation "Life with Chernobyl," the international volunteer non-governmental organisation "Chernobyl Children Aid";
- **resource centres:** the Homel regional non-governmental organisation "Civil Initiatives," the Rechytsa-based non-governmental organisation "Slavutsich";
- **youth organisations:** the regional non-governmental organisation "the Homel Association of Children and Youth," the Homel city non-governmental organisation "the Youth Centre "Hart";
- **cultural and local studies organisations:** "Talaka," a Homel youth non-governmental organisation for local studies; "Karani," a Loyev non-governmental organisation for the protection of the environment and cultural and historical heritage;
- **publishing initiatives:** the youth organisation "Roskvit," the Rechytsa youth organisation "Zyalyonka" and "Rechytsa Review."

As in other regions, Homel has a large coalition of non-governmental organisations, the Assembly of Democratic Non-Governmental Organisations. This is a branch of its nation-wide counterpart, the membership of which fluctuates between 42 and 83 organisations.

Resource centres as well as youth and cultural organisations are the most efficient in co-operating within their areas of activities. However, not a single "professional" organisation of NGOs has yet been established.

IV. THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

The process of building a multi-party system in Belarus in early 1990s was not particularly dynamic. There are a couple of reasons for this.

First, the absence of any real economic reform did not provide an opportunity for society to divide along party lines. Almost all enterprises, the means of production and land remained in the possession of the state, while often-heralded privatisation or degovernmentalisation campaigns merely resembled an imitation of economic reform.

Second, elections to all representative and legislative bodies in Belarus were based on a majority vote, which did not promote a classic multi-party system. Perhaps, only the 1994 presidential election and elections to the Supreme Soviet in 1995-96 were characterised, to a greater or lesser degree, by an active participation of political parties.

It was after the infamous 1996 referendum, leading to the adoption of the anti-democratic constitution, that the already weak political parties completely lost their *raison d'être*. Currently, these parties more closely resemble NGOs than political parties in the classic sense.



Nevertheless, even under such circumstances the country retains political parties and some of them are rather well known to a majority of the population. These include the conservative Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), the liberal-conservative United Civil Party (UCP) as well as various social-democratic and green parties.

Two weak and divided communist parties exist in Belarus. However, they are primarily interested in extracting revenge rather than influencing the political situation in the country.

The same political spectrum is seen also in the Homel region. However, the region has its own specific characteristics. Among democratic parties, the regional organisation of UCP is the strongest. UCP has more members and sympathisers, a broad network and strong support among the business community and intelligentsia.

Another regional characteristic is that of all the political parties registered in Belarus there is only one with its legal address and governing body in Homel — the Belarusian Party "Zyalyoniya" (Green).

Other than the above-mentioned parties, there are two conservative parties operating in the region, BPF and the Conservative-Christian Party (CCP), an offshoot of BPF. The best known social-democratic parties are the Belarusian Social-Democratic Hramada (BSDH) and the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party "Popular Hramada" (BSDP PH), also factions of a once united party.

Inter-party co-operation in the region appears to be much better than in the country as a whole. This co-operation increases along with the size of a town or district and it is not limited by joint actions but goes as far as co-ordinating activities and considering different parties' interests during elections or other nation-wide events.

THE ROLE OF RESOURCE CENTRES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CIVIC SOCIETY

Since it was founded, "Hramadzyanskiya initsyatyvy" ("Civic Initiatives") has continually broadened the scope of its services and influence, increased the number of organisation-clients as well as improved methods of activity and the system of co-operation with partners.

While in 1996–1997 the organisation was merely outlet for technical assistance for a limited number of NGO's, today it can be said that it is the most influential independent institution supporting a civic society in the Homel region. Civic Initiatives (CI) not only assists existing organisations but also stimulates the establishment of new groups, finds partners for them and provides initial 'nourishing.' Progress has been made in this area and those people who are orientated in the dynamics of third sector development in the region would undoubtedly agree that in the course of the last 2–3 years CI has strengthened the third sector not only in the capital city but through the region as well.

However, it should be noted that to date the organisation has operated more on intuition and too little emphasis has been placed on development plans for

the future. It could be said that analysing the current situation is usually the general approach, but it clearly seems that the organisation lacks long-term strategic planning for the development of the entire third sector and not only individual organisations. Despite the attractive results on paper (the number of new organisations established, larger number of clients, etc.), activity is poorly organised and results of it are not evaluated on a regular basis. In this regard, the classification presented below is the first attempt to systematise the organisation's activity, and for this reason, if for no other, it is imperfect and incomplete.



Day of Independence, Minsk, July 27th, 1999.
Photo: IREX/ProMedia

I. TARGET GROUPS AND SPHERES OF INFLUENCE OF THE ASSOCIATION "CIVIC INITIATIVES"

Despite the fact that the resource centre operates for the benefit of non-governmental organisations and that one of its main tasks is increasing the number of clients, it must be said that not all NGO's in the region are using its services.

NGO's that are not clients of the resource centre "Civic Initiatives."

1. Self-sustainable NGO's.

These organisations primarily operate in one specific field (e.g., treating children who suffered as a result of the Chernobyl disaster or the treatment of disabled military veterans). They usually have a very good resource base and permanent partners (including foreign) that renew projects every year. Co-operation with CI is rather unnecessary.

2. NGO's with which Civic initiatives does not want to co-operate.

This group includes pseudo-NGOs artificially created by the government, such as Belarusian Patriotic Association of Youth (BPAY), women's councils and peace committees. These groups are financed by the state budget and their leaders even include representatives of the presidential administration. Regardless of this, these "NGOs" are included in registers and directories of non-governmental organisations.

Also included in this group are organisations, the statutory activity of which does not correspond to the ideals of a civic society, such as the organisation of KGB veterans and pan-Slavic groups.

3. NGO's that do not want to co-operate with Civic Initiatives due to the negative image of CI presented by the regime.

This group mostly includes organisations operating in the sphere of social assistance, which of course is very much needed. However, at present, these organisations count on support from the government and are afraid to damage relations with it. Many organisations representing this category eventually come to learn that placing hopes in the government is a waste of time and no doubt will eventually become our future partners. For example, the regional organisations "Paediatric Haematology," "Parents Association of Children with Cerebral Palsy," "Harmonia' Social and Psychological Rehabilitation Centre" as well as 9 other structures of this type expressed an interest in co-operating with CI. Next year, broader contacts with organisations of this type are planned and CI plans to broaden the scope of its activity. This is important for the Homel region as, in comparison with other regions as well as national statistics, such organisations are much more numerous (see Chapter III. Structure of the Third Sector in the Homel District. Comparative Analysis).

4. Organisations that have no objective information concerning the activity of Civic Initiatives.

The problem here consists in the fact that not only does CI lack advertising possibilities, but the government has conducted a long-term and systematic campaign against Civic Initiatives. Nevertheless, these organisations have development prospects for future co-operation. CI plans to conduct a festival of NGO this year (based on the Polish example) during which, other than concerts, games and competitions for the city's inhabitants, CI and other NGOs will promote their activities. Also necessary is seeking new, non-traditional methods of working with potential partners.

II. PARTNERS AND CLIENTS OF THE RESOURCE CENTRE "CIVIC INITIATIVES"

Non-governmental organisations.

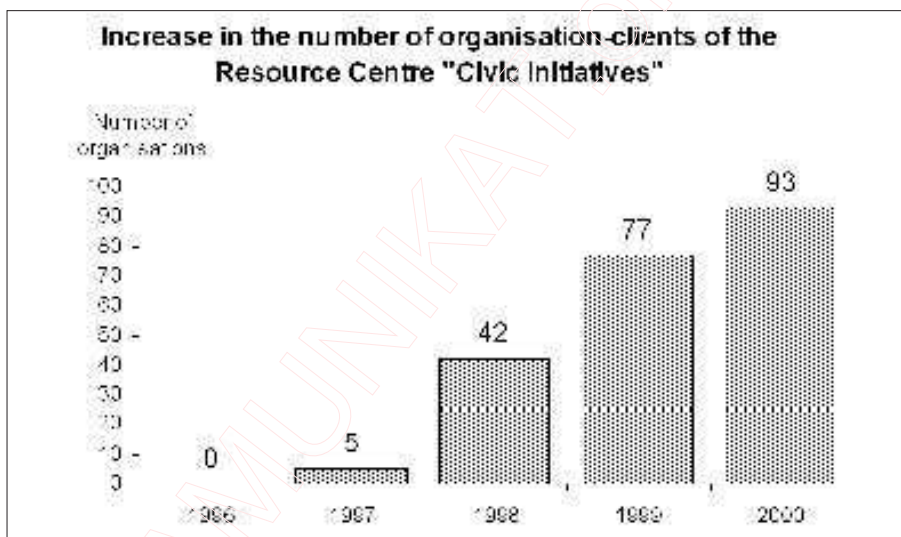
The primary partners and clients are non-governmental organisations and it makes no difference whether they are registered and not. The number of NGOs continues to grow, as does the scope of offered services.

In 1997 Civic Initiatives co-operated only with organisations in Homel. Currently, CI's NGO clients are based in the 17 administrative regions of the district. The number of client-organisations is entered in the register of services rendered every year. Based on this data, plans are made regarding the appropriate quantity of the necessary material, technical and other resources for the next year.

It should also be mentioned that in 1997-1998 CI was unable to co-operate with all NGOs. Clients were selected according to the following priority areas of activity:

- human rights, local government, the state and law;
- youth NGO's;
- NGO's not based in the capital city of Homel.

Since 1999, when Civic Initiatives began to participate in the Open Society Institute program, some limitations were eliminated and co-operation expanded considerably, to the exclusion of pseudo-NGO's created in order to support the ideology of the government.



Clients of Civic Initiatives can be classified in the following manner:

■ according to legal status

- registered — 25 NGO's;
- registered branches of national, regional and interregional associations — 12 NGO's;
- no legal status — 56 NGO's.

■ according to primary area of activity (the majority of NGOs have several areas of activity):

- human rights — 7 NGO's;
- state, law — 21;
- youth — 12;
- social assistance — 26;
- culture, local history, history — 25;
- resource centres — 8.

In addition, there are women's, environmental and professional organisations as well as organisations associating various groups of hobbyists.

■ **according to geographical area of activity:**

- main office located in Homel — 44;
- main office located outside Homel — 49.

Some client-organisations receive only one-time assistance from CI (10% of organisations), other NGO's (40%) are almost totally dependant on the Resource Centre. In conjunction with opening consultation-information centres in such cities as Rechytsa, Svetlohorsk, Buda-Koshalevo, Kalinkovichy, Rogachov and Zhlobin, CI has changed the form of contact with regional NGO's. They currently receive technical assistance and basic consulting from the nearest town where the services are available. Nevertheless, CI continuously makes contacts and organises roundtables, conferences, etc. Practice shows that this type of activity is very important as, other than the intellectual effort expended during a meeting, representatives of organisations exchange experiences and co-ordinate their activity (e.g., during joint participation in observing local elections), and this creates a feeling a solidarity among NGOs and favours the formation of coalitions.

In connection with the ban on activity of non-registered NGOs, the problem arose of legalising them. The problem is particularly important in small localities where there are no other similar organisations. A partial solution involved creating branches of Civic Initiatives, which is a less complicated procedure than registration of a new organisation, as it does not require financial expenditures and permits the use of a private residence as a legal address. Moreover, and most importantly in this case, permission of the special NGO registration committee (chaired by assistant director of the president's administration) is not required. As a result of this activity, CI has opened branches in 11 regions of Homel District, which are actually legal umbrella structures for all democratic NGOs. Civic initiatives plans to open 4 more branches in the near future.

Publishing Initiatives.

Other than NGO's, Resource Centre clients also include two independent regional newspapers *Homelskaya Dumka* (3000 copy print run) and *Rehyon-viesti* (4200 copy print run). Moreover, 6 associations publish information bulletins due to support and assistance granted by CI.

Independent projects occupy a separate place in this activity, of which there were more than 30 in Homel district in 2000. This activity involves youth and topic-based periodicals as well as regional information bulletins, the majority of which has no intention of transforming into a newspaper. Civic Initiatives considers them to be a specific form of social activity. It very frequently occurs that a small initiative group, usually in a small town, plans to create a NGO in order to solve a local problem. This could involve environmental or youth initiatives connected with human rights or any other sphere of activity.

However it is not that simple, not everybody knows where to begin. When CI receives a request for assistance in such cases, it usually advise them to begin by collecting and distributing various types of in-

formation (depending on the sphere of interest). In order for their bulletins to be printed, they must answer the following questions:

- who is the target group?;
- how will the bulletin be distributed?;
- what are the prospects for activity?

In this way, several important tasks are realised. First, the group begins its activity in a more responsible way and continues it by working systematically. Second, the frequency of the bulletin and its quality testify to the seriousness of the group's intentions. Experience shows that organisations that begin activities in this way, frequently begin to initiate other programs and publishing a bulletin becomes just one area of activity. As a result, supporting publishing initiatives is important.

Social Activists

A particular target group, to which CI directs activity, is social activists, as they can be treated as potential leaders. Members of this group are located through publications of the mass media or through other sources and sometimes they find CI. The database of social activists, created in 1989, presently contains more than 1200 people, 25 of whom have gone on to establish NGOs, while others have joined the ranks of existing NGOs. The majority of these people receive CI's information bulletins, as possibilities permit, others receive independent periodicals. Each year, CI organises educational and training seminars for 30-40 social activists. This activity is conducted within the framework of "Leader," a separate program of Civic Initiatives. More than 120 people have attended these seminars. Particular attention is devoted to activists from localities in which no non-governmental structures exist. This activity currently involves representatives from the towns of Aktyabrski, Turau, Khoyniki and Vasilevichy. The program has resulted in the establishment of 25 NGOs to date, of which 6 have been registered and 8 are in the process of registering (see diagram).

Professional and Interest Groups.

For more than a year the activity of Civic Initiatives has included various professional groups such as second school teachers, lecturers from the schools of higher learning, student interest groups, artistic groups and specialised groups of upper secondary students (e.g., economics or journalism).

By supporting teaching groups, CI has the possibility of working directly with youth. CI currently has good relations with teachers' groups in 3 secondary schools and 3 schools of higher learning. Co-operation with journalism classes is particularly interesting. It started as a competition for the best article among young journalists. Later, with the assistance of the Stefan Batory Foundation (Poland), the winners of the contest were given an internship in mass media outlets in Poland. To date, articles of more than 30 participants of this project have appeared in the regional and national press. Moreover, through the assistance of CI, the region's best

youth newspaper *Shkolnaya hazeta* is published, which is edited almost exclusively by secondary school students and journalism department students. This project could soon solve the current problem of a shortage of journalists in the region. This is the most interesting example, but both this and similar projects show that this type of activity should be continued in the future.

Artists.

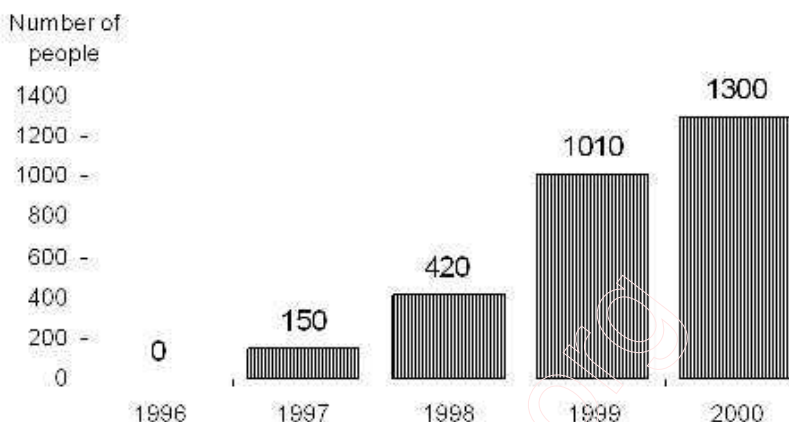
This group includes local artists, musicians, writers, etc. Musicians and writers are the two groups that are able to reach a broader audience in society. In assisting a local artist to organise an exhibition, Civic Initiatives is also making its own mark in society. Naturally, not only artists can benefit from such support, but also those who have an established social position. CI currently co-operates with 9 such people.

The above-mentioned groups are currently the main partners of Civic Initiatives. CI plans to broaden existing contacts in the future and establish contacts with both new target groups and individuals (e.g., historians, lawyers, etc.).

III. NETWORK OF RESOURCE CENTRES IN THE REGION

Time has shown that the selected direction of activity for strengthening the third sector through the establishment of resource centres was appropriate. Due to this activity, the work of many NGO's gained a certain purposefulness. Fairly stable access to material and

Increase in the number of Homel District social activists registered in the database of "Civic Initiatives"



technical resources as well as to computer equipment allowed client-organisations of the resource centres to plan their activities in a realistic manner.

Co-operation between resource centres and initiative groups has been particularly productive, as many organisations have been established due to this co-operation. Civic Initiatives has established 42 such organisations, of which 16 are registered as independent non-governmental organisations.

It is also obvious that among the positive results of the resource centres is the consolidation of the third sector on the regional level and eventually on the national level.

However, practise shows that one resource centre in a district is unable to meet all needs in the creation and development of social organisations. Considering the fact that the territory of Homel district covers more 40 thousand square kilometres and has a population of almost 1.5 million people, it becomes obvious that technical assistance should be available closest to those who need it.

Therefore, it was decided to establish several additional centres that could take on part of the work themselves.

Several criteria were considered in establishing these centres:

- the possession of various types of resources;
- the territorial factor;
- the professionalism of the personnel;
- the number of structures and potential clients;
- the social activity in the region.

In this way, first three and then 4 more additional resource centres were established in the Homel region. These centres were created on the basis of existing NGOs, which were completely independent. At present, the situation has changed slightly and in order to legalise these



"The March of Freedom," Minsk, Oct. 17th, 1999.

Photo: IREX/ProMedia

NGOs (which were not registered), CI created "umbrellas" in the form of regional structures of "Civic Initiatives."

CI informed its clients about the establishment of the additional centres and about their possibilities. The main principle was that everyone could use the most convenient resource centre, including the district Resource Centre. Moreover, co-operating organisations in all cities were asked to grant assistance, within their means, to these centres. The majority of the organisations supported the move and three organisations in Petrykov, Buda-Koshelevo and Dobrush continue to permit others to use their equipment.

It is still too early to issue a final summary of the results of this activity, but some successes are already evident. If the criteria of the number of new NGOs in the region and the increase in the number of social activities are used, then the most successful have been the activities of the resource centres in Rechytsa and Svetlohorsk, the least successful in Mozyr, Zhlobin, Pohachov, Loyev and Kalinkovichy.

Nevertheless, all centres have realised the main task. Fundamentally, they were and are the only place where the democratic element of the community in individual cities can meet together.

Today, in the majority of district cities with populations of more than 70 and even 100 thousand people, the resource centre office is the only office of a non-governmental organisation in the town! Therefore, without a doubt, it can be stated that the small resource centres are irreplaceable in the process of increasing civic activity in their communities and regions.

TRENDS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The authorities have recently been intensifying their efforts against non-governmental organisations. This will force NGOs to further consolidate and seek efficient ways of defending themselves against the authorities' aggression.

This is perhaps the reason for the growing politicisation of NGOs in Belarus. The emergence of inter-sector coalitions, associations and unions of non-governmental organisations, political parties and trade unions cannot be ruled out.

Increasing the influence of NGOs on social processes in areas outside the large towns remains a challenge. This is beyond the capacity of one small organisation, let alone one operating illegally. Therefore the establishment of NGOs in the provinces is a strategic goal of donor organisations, existing coalitions of non-governmental organisations and resource centres. A temporary way to legalise non-registered organisations in rural areas may be converting them into local branches of regional organisations. This is particularly feasible in areas affected by Chernobyl, where it is difficult to find even the 10 people required for registering an NGO.

Foreign donor organisations are today the main and almost the only source of financing the third sector in Belarus. Therefore, it is important to create small-scale local resource centres to serve the common needs of all NGOs in a respective locality, espe-

cially under the present circumstances of limited resources.

Considering the social and political situation in Belarus and the Homel region in particular, defending human rights, disseminating objective information, supporting various youth initiatives and preserving the cultural and historical heritage are essential areas of NGO activity.

As most provincial organisations lack experience in obtaining grants and find it difficult to compete for resources with their colleagues in the capital and larger cities, special competitions should be organised for them.



Joint projects between organisations in the Belarusian countryside and foreign organisations would be especially interesting and beneficial. Such co-operation is possible in any area from social projects to human rights defence, in the form of long-term patronage of a Belarusian NGO, volunteer exchange or educating NGO leaders. The main objective of such programmes would be to support Belarusian social activists who operate under extremely complicated conditions created by the totalitarian regime.

It is generally known that foreign donor organisations are the only source of financing the third sector in Belarus. Therefore, in conditions of extremely limited resources, establishing small resource centres for meeting the general needs of all democratic non-governmental organisations operating in individual localities remains a problem.

All resource centres cannot be treated equally. Their skills and experience, the territorial factor and the number of NGOs in this and other regions must be taken into account. Finally, all structures of this type must have a detailed strategic plan of activity. Generally, all resource centres can be divided into three groups: district, interregional and regional or municipal. They should also have a defined scope of services that they are able to offer.

This classification could be as follows:

Services offered by regional or municipal resource centres:

- providing technical assistance (photocopying, access to a computer);
- providing means of communications;

- conducting regular consultations (including with specialists invited from other cities) connected with NGO activity;
- providing access to premises for conducting small events organised by NGOs;
- access for clients at designated times (2–3 hours a day or 1–2 days a week).



*Oppositional action against the election to Parliament,
Minsk, Oct. 14th, 2001.
Photo: IREX/ProMedia*

Services offered by interregional resource centres:

In addition to all services offered by municipal resource centres, interregional resource centres should also:

- possess full-time consultants assisting in solving current problems connected NGO activity;
- organise seminars and training sessions devoted to founding and registering NGOs as well as to computer and other office machine basics;
- be accessible for clients on a daily basis;
- service not less than 10–15 client-organisations;
- include several local governmental administrative bodies within the scope of their activities.

Services offered by district resource centres:

The scope of their activity should cover the entire district. In addition to providing assistance for NGOs, they should also engage in analytical activity and work planning for an extended period of time (2–3 years). Other than the services offered by the above-mentioned centres, the district resource centres should also:

- provide consultations connected with legal, economic and other aspects of NGO activity;
- have access to the Internet and other modern means of communications;
- offer such services as text translation from the most popular languages;
- seek partners for client-organisations, including foreign partners;
- grant assistance in preparing project proposals;
- have the possibility of conducting seminars (2- or 3-day) for partner organisations;
- grant assistance in composing and printing bulletins and small newsletters, as well as publishing, at least, small brochures;

- possess a library for the needs of social activities, subscribe to local, regional and national newspapers.

However, this is the external and the visible side of resource centre activity. Most important is that they be structures responsible for the development of the third sector in their respective areas. They should not only assist existing NGOs, but also promote the establishment of new NGOs, and precisely this must be one of the criteria in evaluating their work. In turn, assistance for the resource centres should be provided by the district resource centres as well as Belaruskaya Asatsyatsya Resursnykh Centrau (Belarusian Association of Resource Centres — BARC), of which these structures will comprise a component part in the future.

If it is assumed that the work of a resource centre should be continually broadening the database of social activists and increasing the number of client-organisations, legal (i.e., registered) work with youth is very important. For example, if conducting classes with a neutral topic is supported with a small grant, an opportunity of establishing contacts with students exists. Therefore, it is very important that district resource centres maintain a small sum of money for micro-grants. With all respect to national small grants competitions, it should be acknowledged that their flexibility is limited, and sometimes it is necessary to operate quickly. Therefore, a district resource centre should have 5–7 thousand USD available for this purpose. In some sense, all projects that are entered in district competitions are experimental projects, which create the risk of using these funds. But as practise shows, the result is significantly greater than the risk. The district resource centres should present a more detailed conception of regional small grant competitions when submitting subsequent proposals for awarding grants.

II. TERRITORY AND TARGET GROUPS OF RESOURCE CENTRE ACTIVITY

Many organisations were engaged in creating resources centres in the last 2–3 years. On the one hand this is understandable and it explains the urgency of the problem. However, there are doubts if this is not transitory activity for some activists and their participation in the creation of such resource centres is conditioned by the missions of donor organisations. Therefore, organisations that intend to become resource centres should have experience in third sector work, experienced and successful members as well as have some authority among partners.

The experience of Civic Initiatives shows that the most important growth areas of social activity are mainly the large cities, schools of higher learning and the youth environment generally. In addition, the need for establishing a resource centre in a given locality should also depend on size of the population, the existence of secondary schools and schools of higher learning and the number of potential client-organisations. Considering the above, CI believes that maintaining the following resource centres is important:

Interregional:

Rechyt'sa (population — 108 thousand, of which 66 thousand live in the capital of the region and 6 thousand in other towns of the region). The city has two institutes of higher learning: teaching and agricultural schools. Number of potential clients — 8 NGO's and 2 information bulletins. The regions of Khoyniki and Brahinsk are also located within the scope of activity of this resource centre.

During the past year, many new organisations were established in the region. "Slavutsich," the most influential and enjoying the most authority has operated as a resource centre for more than a year.

Svetlohors'k (population — 98 thousand, of which 73 thousand live in the capital of the region and 5 thousand in other towns of the region). The town has a branch of a private school of higher learning and an industrial-technical school. Number of potential clients — 8 NGO's and 5 information bulletins. The region of Aktyabr'ski is also located within the scope of activity of this centre.

This resource centre was selected due to the fairly large number of NGOs operating in this region and the fact that the only private Belarusian-language secondary school in the Homel district is located in this city. Many graduates of this school actively work in the third sector.

Mozyr (population — 130 thousand, of which 109 thousand live in the capital of the region). Mozyr has a teaching institute, branch of an international humanities institute, technical school and medical school. Number of potential clients — 15 NGO's and 3 information bulletins. The regions of Zhytkovitski, Lelchyt'ski, Petrykovski, Yelski and Narovlanski are also located within the scope of activity of this resource centre. Until recently, Mozyr was an administrative centre of Poleski district and even after its incorporation into Homel district it retained its influence on surrounding regions. Unfortunately, the city is not now characterised by substantial social activity, but it has a lot of potential and an important strategic significance.

Regional

Kalinkovichy (population — 72 thousand, of which 38 thousand live in the capital of the region and 1.5 thousand in other towns of the region). Base organisation — "Social Centre." The town has a higher agricultural school. Number of potential clients — 4 NGO's and 2 information bulletins.

Zhlobin (population — 106 thousand, of which 71 thousand live in the capital of the region and 1.4 thousand in other towns of the region). Base organisation — "Krynitsy." The town has a branch of Homel Technical University and a higher agricultural school. Number of potential clients — 4 NGO's and 1 information bulletin.

Rogachov (population — 71 thousand, of which 35 thousand live in the capital and 0.7 thousand in other towns of the region). Base organisation — "Civic Choice." The town has two higher schools of learning: a medical school and a teaching school. Number of potential clients — 4 NGO's and 1 information bulletin.

Loyev (population — 18 thousand, of which 8 thousand live in the capital of the region). Base organisation — "Karani" ("Roots"). The town has a teaching

school. Number of potential clients — 3 NGO's and 1 information bulletin.

Buda-Kashalevo (population — 44 thousand, of which 10 thousand live in the capital and 5 thousand in other towns of the region). Base organisation — "Radzimichy." The town has an agro-technical school. Number of potential clients — 3 NGO's.

In the future, such resource centres should be established in each of the 21 regions located in the district.



"The March of Freedom," Minsk, Oct. 1st, 2000.
Photo: IREX/ProMedia

Other than a structure based on the administrative division, resource centres for individual target NGO groups should also be established, taking into account the specific conditions in a given region. For example, the social organisation "Hart" is already working as a resource centre in Homel. It has its steady clients comprising organisations associating youth.

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