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## WHAT IS THE ASSEMBLY?

The initiative to co-ordinate the activity of non-governmental organisations in Belarus appeared in the second half of 1996. It was a time of radical changes in the Belarusian society, when dictatorial tendencies in the country's political system escalated and resulted in a coup that brought about Lukashenka's presidential dictatorship.

A majority of organisations understood that their further internal development was impossible without co-ordination, information about the activity of other NGOs, or common strategy in relation to sponsors. Those problems were solvable only with the help of a structure which, on one hand, would have function as a co-ordination and representative body, and on the other, respect the sovereignty of each, even the smallest, member organisation.

Long debate about approaches to co-ordination ended up with the founding of a single organising committee of what was called the National Assembly of Democratic Non-Governmental Organisations of Belarus. The organising committee agreed to the need for a broad and open coalition of democratically oriented NGOs to operate throughout the country. This approach was approved by 250 organisations that took part in the 1<sup>st</sup> Assembly, which also introduced its co-ordination body — the Working group. Several months later, the Executive Bureau was formed as a professional organ of the Assembly.

The Assembly faced the following challenges:

To establish co-operation among NGOs in the field of information exchange;

To build a system of mutual services;

To expand the scope of the third sector's influence onto society;

To build a system of collective defence of NGOs' rights;

To attract new members to the Assembly.

A bulletin of non-governmental organisations of Belarus, in its electronic and printed versions, was very important as it became the main medium of information exchange for democratic NGOs.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of Non-Governmental Organisations was held on November 14, 1998.

Upon the issue of the presidential edict about re-registration of political parties, trade unions, and other non-governmental organisations, which threatened the existence of a democratic third sector in Belarus, the Assembly started a salvage programme in 1999 called "SOS — The Third Sector."

In summer 2000, the Assembly of Democratic Non-Governmental Organisations of Belarus carried out a campaign to defend the rights of NGOs and recover from the effects of the state re-registration. Within the campaign, the Assembly published a brochure titled "The Re-registration of Non-Governmental Organisations in Belarus in 1999," held a press conference, a rally in Minsk and pickets in four other towns of Belarus.

Before the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress, the Assembly re-registered its members internally. The congress, held on December 2–3, 2000, decided to register the Assembly as an association of non-governmental organisations under the name "Assembly," approved its Statute and signed a constituent treaty.

The congress also decided to participate in the 2001 election by organising a mobilisation campaign and observing the election. In 2001, those campaigns were carried out and were among the most successful actions during the run-up to the presidential election.

Under the conditions after the election, the focus of the Assembly's effort returned to developing contacts with the people and winning their confidence. Of high importance for this activity will be National Programmes planned by the Assembly, which join efforts of various non-governmental organisations in that field.

Another important line of activity is further development of international co-operation with non-governmental organisations in other countries. This applies to already existing strategic partnerships such as Poland or the United States, and to new developments like Wales, Germany, or the Ukraine.