

BELARUS

Capital: Minsk

GDP per capita: \$1,464

Population: 10,200,000

Inflation: 213%

Unemployment: 2.3%

Foreign Direct Investment: \$188,300,000

OVERALL DESCRIPTION: 5.7

The government's hostility and suspicion toward the Third Sector fundamentally define the environment for NGOs in Belarus. The 1999 re-registration campaign, declared by the president's administration and aimed at creating obstacles for the Third Sector, halved the number of registered NGOs. There are currently 1,919 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice in Belarus.

The economic, political and legal environment in Belarus is not yet conducive to civil society development. As in many former Soviet countries, the state distrusts NGOs, and therefore hampers the process of creating and registering groups with a complex, time-consuming and costly registration procedure. At the same time, the state harasses unregistered NGOs with penalties and even criminal charges against activists. The system of tax privileges favors pro-government NGOs with little advantage for the rest of the Third Sector. Due to the conflicts of the legislation on business activities and regulations of NGOs, any cost-recovery activities by NGOs lead to deprivation of even small privileges. Local businesses in Belarus, however weak, do support socially beneficial activities of NGOs, but there are no tax privileges for this sponsorship. Society is very fragmented, and there is virtually no inter-sectoral cooperation. With few exceptions, the general attitude is that of mutual distrust between the NGOs and the state.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 7.0

The legal process makes NGO registration both painstaking and financially costly, and gives officials many opportunities to manipulate and interfere in the process. The registration procedure is unnecessarily long and complex, including two (three for local NGOs) stages, with the ultimate permission for registration granted by the President's Board, a body whose status and authority is not legally defined. The law poses several impediments to all categories of NGOs, thereby hampering citizen initiatives. For example, the law requires a large number of founders and fixed membership. The law also requires a legal address prior to registration and means that only a designated office

space, not a residence, may be used, which is too costly for most NGOs. Likewise, the registration fee of \$90 is a significant burden given the current level of income of the majority of population.

The law on NGOs, numerous legal acts, and practice by various controlling bodies are very controversial. On the one hand, the NGO Act forbids any interference in the activities of NGOs apart from the control and supervision by the prosecutor's department, taxation and registration bodies. On the other hand, another act permits authorities to monitor both the NGOs, and other legal entities, for conforming to a vast variety of regulations. Minor violations may lead to

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penalties in the form of warnings by registration bodies, with the second warning leading to the liquidation of the NGO. Paradoxically, impediments by the state, most of all inspections by the registration and taxation bodies, force NGOs to upgrade their management practices, which increases NGO sustainability.

A significant amount of work has been done to increase knowledge of NGO issues among local lawyers. With the help of an expert team of lawyers, the majority of Counterpart Alliance for Partnership (CAP) grantees were able to successfully re-register in 1999. However, local legal capacity is still inadequate, and needs additional resources and effort.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 5.0

As a result of the weak history of civil society and the attitude of the state toward the third sector in Belarus, most Belarusian NGOs are very weak organizationally. This is reflected in their poor management practices and work with clients. Frequently, NGOs can not effectively identify their clients, and still lack either an understanding of the need for constituency building, or the skills and resources to reach their constituency.

Few NGOs engage in strategic planning, with the exception of those who have received grants from international donors that require mission formulation, strategic planning techniques, and the establishment of sound management procedures.

Many NGO internal structures copy the government's authoritarian system, with autocratic leaders concentrating administrative power. NGOs may formally assign powers to a Board of Directors, but this Board is not always

involved in the decision making process. On the other hand, organizations receiving foreign grants sometimes receive management consulting services to help them overcome these problems.

While leading NGOs have regular staff, the majority of Belarusian NGOs have no permanent staff. Staff members are often recruited on a temporary basis to accomplish a task associated with a certain grant. In the regions, NGOs have a wide circle of volunteers.

In Minsk, NGOs generally have sufficient supplies and equipment. In the regional centers, however, only the leading NGOs have sufficient supplies and access to communication, including e-mail and the Internet. Sometimes, even NGOs with adequate equipment do not use it because they lack appropriate skills. The donor community views upgrading the technology base of NGOs and the skills of staff and volunteers as a priority.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 6.0

Relationships between the state and the Third Sector in Belarus are characterized by a selective subsidy policy pursued by the state, depending on the degree of NGO loyalty to the authorities. This selective subsidy policy preserves

paternalistic sentiments in the government-controlled part of the Third Sector. Other NGOs survive on sporadic voluntary donations, grants, or have no means at all. Fund-raising skills are not

developed, and frequently consist of a non-systemic search for resources.

The extremely unfavorable economic environment that obstructs the development of local business, and a regulatory environment with no tax exemptions for charitable activities, prevents NGOs from accessing local resources. There are few local sources of philanthropy, either individual or corporate. The procedure for collecting donations is not legally defined, and state control bodies provide little guidance. NGOs engage in charitable actions like collecting clothes for elderly, cash for medical treatment, or presents for children, at their own risk.

A number of foreign donors, including the Soros Foundation, which used to finance a lot of the civil society activities were ousted from Belarus. Associated indigenous organizations were liquidated. The limited number of international donors currently working in Belarus inhibits diversification of the Third

Sector's foreign funding. The long-term association of an NGO with one or two large donors is typical in Belarus, leading to donor-driven projects, as opposed to local initiatives or demand-driven activities.

The government uses tax, audit, and other inspections to harass those NGOs engaged in civil society development activities. The authorities also discriminate against businesses supporting NGO activities by harassing them through tax inspections and audits. An exception is made for local businesses rendering assistance to social service NGOs.

The majority of NGOs have inadequate financial management skills. Moreover, many NGOs are forced to not operate transparently in order to continue their activities (e.g. small grants' programs by resource centers). This lack of transparency creates conditions for corruption.

ADVOCACY: 6.0

The state's suspicion of all non-governmental initiatives has politicized the Third Sector. When democratically oriented NGOs touch upon issues related to human rights or demonstrate the advantages of democratic values and procedures, their activities clash with the government's attempt to regulate all spheres of social life. There is no systematic cooperation between the authorities and NGOs. Neither group appreciates the necessity of regular cooperation, though some social services NGOs can boast of successful advocacy efforts with the government.

There are some instances of issue-based coalitions and advocacy campaigns in Belarus, such as raising public awareness of the importance of

gender issues. As a result of an effective lobbying effort by the women's movement, women's NGOs gained representation in the National Coordination Council on Gender Issues. Women's organizations are also actively involved in mobilizing women during the pre-election period.

There are few mechanisms for NGOs to participate in the political process other than protest actions. For example, strikes of private entrepreneurs initiated by the Trade Union of Entrepreneurs resulted in the government's backing-off from new restrictive regulations. Active lobbying efforts of NGOs so far are relatively rare, because of the positions of the state and the Third Sector leadership

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SERVICE PROVISION: 5.0

In Belarus, the provision of goods and services by NGOs is underdeveloped. Mostly, NGOs render services to Third Sector representatives, thus becoming self-serving organizations. NGO market research and marketing efforts leave much to be desired. Services are primarily limited to health, education, and cultural and historical activities. While many NGOs serve as resource centers for other organizations and citizens, the quantity and quality of their services are insufficient due to the inadequate resource base. Social service NGOs are the best at designing products and services that reflect their constituency's needs. Other NGOs rely on their ideas of the community's needs, rather than hard data obtained through surveys, opinion polls, focus groups, etc.

The government generally regards non-governmental organizations as anti-governmental. Recognition of NGOs' role in society is granted exclusively to the social services NGOs. In 1999, the NGO "We Are With You" became the first CAP grantee in Belarus to receive a Government Matching Grant. The grant supported a project helping mentally challenged orphans understand their legal rights to live fuller independent lives, and was instrumental in initiating a state regulation protecting mentally disabled youth from real-estate fraud. The organization has additionally been recognized by the State as the only organization in Belarus working professionally with teenage orphans and youth with psychophysical disabilities, and now has the right to participate in decision-making on serious social and legal questions affecting its clients.

INFRASTRUCTURE: 5.0

The infrastructure of the Third Sector is in its formative stage, and under pressure from the social and political environment. There are twenty-four resource centers, but they sometimes provide their services to a limited group of organizations. Belarusian resource centers also serve as a flexible mechanism to provide small grants to young, unregistered NGOs or civic initiatives, thereby facilitating numerous democratic actions and projects. Indigenous grant-making capacity is slowly being developed by incorporating local representatives onto international donor selection boards and using major local NGOs to re-grant international donor funds.

NGO coalitions in Belarus still are rather ephemeral due to a number of

disincentives, including legal impediments. There are some informal alliances of Belarusian NGOs centered around the regional resource centers that have mastered a system of information exchange and some coordination of activities. However, this mechanism still needs work since coalitions have not developed a common policy.

In 1997, the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs was formed to unite NGOs committed to the principles of Belarusian independence, democracy, market reform, and the protection of human rights and freedoms. The Assembly includes about 700 members embracing a wide range of organizations, including youth, women, environmental, social services, cultural,

and ethnic groups. About half of the Assembly NGO members are unregistered but active. The Assembly is represented by regional resource centers in each region of Belarus. At its Congress in early December 2000, the Assembly resolved to register itself and thus create a formal structure to support the Third Sector.

Due to the fragmented character of Belarusian society, there is very little

awareness of the possibilities for and advantages of partnerships between NGOs, businesses and the government.

As a result of international donor training programs and development grants, training on basic NGO management is available, but far from sufficient. There is a need to increase the number of specialists and the quality of training in management and marketing, as well as financial management and legal issues.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 6.0

The public image of NGOs and of the Third Sector as a whole is rather ambiguous, but NGOs do not enjoy sufficient grass-roots support in Belarus today. A recent poll conducted by the Independent Institute for Social, Economic and Political Research registered extremely low public awareness of NGOs activities (1.4% of population). The main reason for this is the dire situation of the Belarusian people, who are mostly concerned with their survival. Official statistics suggest that 46% of people find themselves below the poverty line. Impoverishment leads to atomization of society and absence of civil solidarity, which obstructs active social life. The public is largely unaware of the goals of civil society organizations in general, and activities of Belarusian NGOs in particular. NGOs do little to publicize their agenda and get their message to the people. NGOs often can not demonstrate their usefulness and capacities to businesses, and generally appeal for assistance, rather than offer services.

There is a substantial difference between the coverage of third-sector activities between state and non-governmental media, with the

independent media giving more attention to civil society issues. Those NGOs that do publicize their activities or promote their public image, do so primarily through the independent media, and are developing relationships with independent journalists. The importance of positive coverage is recognized by most of the international donor grantees, and their success stories often appear in the local media. However, public relations and image promotion efforts by the majority of NGOs remain weak, and could benefit from further training.

Many public organizations are not transparent in their work, because of the environment, and though there are regular internal reporting procedures within the majority of NGOs, the environment in Belarus makes it dangerous to publish reports or reveal too much information about an organization's activities. The most advanced NGOs adopt codes of ethics or try to demonstrate transparency in their operations, while authoritarianism or anarchy characterizes the minor ones.