



*Naše mise*

**„Kdekoli a kdykoli ve službě demokracii, lidským právům a občanské společnosti.“**

The current special issue is devoted to the subject of non-governmental organisations in Russia. DEMAS member organisations are conducting an extensive research project in the field of monitoring of the Russian third sector. The 11 Czech NGOs working across borders in the field of democracy promotion and human rights protection, associated in DEMAS, when considering their participation in the current project, counted on the possibility of utilising to the maximum extent the beneficial timing of the beginning of the project coinciding with the concluding two months of the Czech Republic's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

It was expected that the interest in furthering contacts between Czech NGOs and human rights activists and those promoting democracy development in the Russian Federation would be enhanced by the greater visibility of the Czech Republic on the international scene, as well as the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, enhancing the goals and focus of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (and with the EaP the inclusion of Belarus). The EaP was initiated in 2008 by Poland and Sweden, gaining later support of the Visegrad Four countries' summit and of the European Commission. During the Czech Presidency of the European Council, the EaP was officially adopted in March 2009, and launched at a summit of the EU and EaP countries held in Prague on 7 May 2009.

DEMAS member organisations participated intensively in the preparation of the events related to the Prague EaP summit, specifically in the conference [Eastern Partnership: Towards Civil Society Forum](#) held in Prague on 5–6 May 2009. This conference was organised by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a DEMAS member organisation. In tandem, on 5–6 May 2009, another conference, [Europe of Engaged Citizens – Resources and Sustainability](#), was held in Brno, Czech Republic, under the auspices of the Czech EU Presidency, also attended by some DEMAS member representatives.

Unfortunately, the Czech Presidency of the European Council was placed under strain due to the fall of the government resulting from internal political developments, which to certain degree diminished the expected impact of the specific timing of the project launch. Nevertheless, the Prague EaP summit and the conferences on the EaP Civil Society Forum and on Europe of Engaged Citizens were well attended and provided an opportunity to meet a range of important figures from the EaP countries and specifically from the Russian Federa-

tion, who took part in these events. Some contacts made during these two conferences were utilised for planning the introductory visit to Russia in the framework of the current project.

As expected, besides the EaP initiative, which has drawn suspicion from Russian politicians, other events were to a certain degree also reflected in the debates in Russia with Russian human rights activists. Besides the EU-Russia meeting in Khabarovsk, it was namely the visit of US President Barack Obama to Moscow and the surrounding activities that took place in Moscow.

From the Russian perspective, the launch of the EaP – together with the European Council decision of June 2009 on the need to diversify the sources of energy supplies to the EU – is a part of alleged efforts to isolate Russia. On the other hand, the Obama visit – with the proclaimed will of both sides to “reset” US-Russia relations – gave impetus to the efforts to show Russia as a country returning to the position of a world-power. Both these attitudes were reflected in many of the discussions held in Russia during the July visit by DEMAS members.

Immediately before the July visit to Russia of DEMAS representatives, during the visit itself, and also shortly before or after some of the meetings with Russian activists, instances of harassment of human rights activists occurred, and, in Chechnya, the influential human rights activist and journalist, Mrs Natalia Estimirova, was kidnapped and later found dead. Due to these events, it was even impossible to meet in Moscow, in Kazan and in Nizhny Novgorod with activists of “Memorial”, an organisation that strives for open, truthful and unrestricted recovery of all historical facts related to Russia and its society. Mrs Estimirova was also an associate of Memorial.

Nevertheless, all the above-mentioned events and political background did not hinder the planning and the outcome of the visits of DEMAS representatives to Russia. A summary follows about the various Russian NGOs dealing with human rights and democracy promotion as well as with civic society, understanding history, or ecological activities.

Among the first Russian non-governmental organisations visited was the [Museum and Social Center of Andrei Sakharov](#) (MCAS), an important part of the civil society structure in Moscow. It is not only a museum collecting data about dissident and other activities related to the promotion of democracy and opposition against the totalitarian regimes during Imperial Russia, Soviet Union, and after 1989 the contemporary Russian Federation.

It is also an important meeting place for intellectuals in Moscow, first of all those who are still involved in some form in human rights and democracy promotion.

According to S. M. Lukasheskij, the newly appointed Executive Director of MCAS, the situation within the civil society of Russia has been strongly influenced by the introduction in 2006 of the new law on non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The main repressive provisions introduced by the law, or those that might be easily misused for repression, relate to the requirement of mandatory registration. This involved not only the requirement to provide to the authorities documentation about the statutory incorporation of the NGO, but also to fill out complicated forms. In the event that even a minute mistake was found in the documents submitted, the whole registration procedure was stopped, and had to be re-commenced from scratch. This is usually not a cheap procedure, as it involves the work of experienced lawyers. If the authorities asked for additional documents and the organisation failed to submit them within the allotted timeframe, it was considered an offence that could even be a cause for a court suit. Fortunately, the government did not have enough capacity to manage the amount of cases that could have resulted, which is demonstrated by the fact that only about 10 per cent of organisations were harassed in this way. As of today, amendments to the law have been proposed, and President Dimitri Medvedev has promised to support their introduction.

As regards [DEMOS](#), the Centre continues to be engaged in direct intervention activities, whenever there are cases of evident misuse of power or violation of the constitutional rights of citizens. One of its current projects is monitoring the fate of those who participated or were otherwise involved in the two Chechen wars. One of the strongest groups, which formed in Kazan the Association of Russian-Chechen Friendship, has been closed and its leader put under trial by the Moscow Ministry of Internal Affairs. The case of the murder of Natalia Estimirova, who was one of the most active and brave women fighting for the human rights in Chechnya, was one episode in a long series of threats, some of which have, unfortunately, been implemented.

The visit to the [Moscow Helsinki Group](#) (MHG) was considered important for obtaining a clearer picture about the current structure of human rights activities in Russia, as well as for obtaining recommendations for further visits.

MHG was established in 1976, similarly as in many other countries of the former Soviet bloc,

as a citizens' initiative based upon expectations for improvements in human and citizens rights following the agreements signed on 1 August 1975 by the Soviet Union with the USA and Western European countries at the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Therefore, MHG is the oldest of the organisations in the Russian Federation currently active in the field of protection of human rights. More about its history and the individuals behind its works is available on the MHG website.

The current activities of MHG are oriented towards supporting and consulting various other organisations in their efforts to monitor and propose solutions to the following issues: evidence of torture and other humiliating treatment, violation of the right to a fair trial, freedom of speech, right to public information, freedom of assembly, freedom of forming associations, radical nationalism and opposition to it, observance of laws during elections, observance of basic social and labour rights, right to ecological security, living conditions of children, women, migrants, persons in asylum and displaced persons, living conditions of soldiers and prisoners, legal situation of mentally handicapped persons, and discrimination due to sexual orientation and gender.

The [Centre for European Security](#) (CES) at the Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Science (ISSS RAS) was created according to the decision of the Russia-NATO Permanent Joint Council in 1997, and operated originally as the NATO Documentation Centre for European Security Studies. It is located in the building of the Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences and the Russian Academy of Sciences, and, correspondingly, shares its library and human resources. Its main roles are

- Analysing the role of NATO, OSCE, the EU and the Council of Europe in the security field
- Providing information to the Russian public about activities of the NATO-Russia Council
- Monitoring changes taking place within the structures and composition of NATO, the EU, and OSCE, and assessing their impact on the security sphere
- Contributing to a better public understanding in Russia as well as within NATO member states of the changes that have already taken place as regards Russia-NATO, Russia-EU, and Russia-US relations.

The [EastWest Institute](#) (EWI) branch in Russia has been trying since 1990 to develop good relations with prominent personalities in the Russian political sphere on the one side and to support the growth and participation in political debate of Russian civil society organisations on the other. The main objective of the EWI is to assist in improving US-Russia relations, which should be based upon a

better understanding of the opinions and motivations for decision-making in both countries. This is considered by the EWI as the cornerstone of a process leading to greater global security and stronger economic and cultural co-operation between two global nuclear powers.

According to EWI, the Russians do not want to talk about the past, about the feelings lingering behind after the acts of the former Soviet Union. This is especially true as regards relations to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

EWI would suggest organising an event, where qualified speakers would be given space to explain the current position of the Russian government as regards the content of Medvedev's proposed European Security Treaty. Such discussions might also include questions concerning human rights protection, democracy development and similar issues in relation to security.

In short, EWI would recommend approaching Russia with a positive vision of the future relations between Russia and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The [Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights](#) (CDDHR) is an independent centre or group of experts, established in 1998, whose mission is to support the efficiency of democratic institutions and sustainable mechanisms of protection of human rights. To achieve this goal, CDDHR assists in institutional strengthening of civil society organisations and facilitates their participation in policy-making processes. The improvement of public administration and support for the rule of law are essential to achieve this goal. The lawyers and experts of the CDDHR assist citizens of Russia to understand the values of democracy and its importance in their everyday life.

The main topics of interest of CDDHR are:

- Transparency of legislative processes in Russian Duma [Parliament] through development of civil control over policy-makers
- Assistance in drafting taxation reform and participation in drafting the amendments to the repressive law on NGOs
- Fight with racism, discrimination and xenophobia through promotion of ideas of interethnic and social tolerance
- Support for ongoing reform of the military forces and for democratic changes in the Russian Army
- Anti-corruption activities and research on the influence of corruption on enforcement of human rights and on development of democracy in Russia
- Promotion of democratic values, including protection of human rights within the country and internationally

- Development of a true dialogue between NGOs and government officials.

[Lawyers for Constitutional Rights and Freedoms](#) (JURIX) comprises a group of young jurists led by experienced attorneys who participated in drafting the Constitution of the Russian Federation and other laws.

The purpose of JURIX is to contribute to the development of an open society and the rule of law in the Russian Federation, to defend the constitutional rights of individuals, to provide free legal assistance, and to disseminate the ideals of democracy and the rule of law.

For this purpose, JURIX combines litigation, legal research, legal expertise, and the dissemination of knowledge to secure advances in its main priority areas, which are "*Free Legal Aid*", i.e. free-of-charge representation of clients before domestic courts and before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, "*Anti-Discrimination*", which includes collecting data on ethnic profiling, monitoring discriminatory practices of the police, and developing educational tools for better orientation in Russian laws, "*Freedom of Speech and Expression*" i.e. monitoring media reporting on trials, operating hotlines and organising lectures for journalists, publishing studies on implementation of international legal standards and comparative perspectives with regards to the conflicts and balances between freedom of expression and freedom of religion, as well as providing legal expertise in concrete cases, and "*Strengthening Human Rights Institutions*" through supporting co-operation between human rights organisations and regional ombudspersons, and through promoting dialogue between NGOs and state bodies.

The [Inter-regional Association of Human Rights Organisations "AGORA"](#) was established in 2005 as a group of seven lawyers, who decided to devote their knowledge, energy and time to assist in defending people exposed to harassment for their views or lifestyles. It defends human rights activists, reports about cases of proven abuse of persons by police or the army, about cases of medical negligence, and about cases of harassment of minors in state-run institutions for children.

Currently, AGORA Kazan serves also as the headquarters for similar groups of lawyers working in Chita [East Bajkal Region], Krasnojarsk [Central Siberia], Cheboksary [Chuvash Autonomous Republic], Izhevsk [Udmurtia], Abakan [Khakassia in the Black Sea region], and Saint Petersburg. In each partner organisation, there are 5–10 staff, some of which are involved as jurists assisting in the defence of concrete cases. There is always somebody working with the media – TV and press – since one of the aims of AGORA is to inform the general public about possibilities to defend themselves against illegal actions undertaken by state-run authorities.

In the AGORA Kazan centre, there are currently four former prosecutors and four former officers with authority and experience in investigation practice. That makes it possible to assign two to four specialists per case. AGORA is concentrated on professional legal support of those who ask to be defended by the lawyers of AGORA.

AGORA informs Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, and JURIX about the outcomes of cases, and they then distribute the information and use it for more general purposes.

AGORA Kazan considers as an important part of its activities training in legal issues related to the protection of human rights as required by the Constitution and other laws of the Russian Federation and its constituent states. The training is provided to the police, detention institutions, investigators, court officials and judges, as well as to the staff of institutions established for the compulsory education of children. In this field, it is also important to monitor cases of harassment in schools, in the army and in state-run establishments for children. As its ultimate goal, AGORA would like to participate in fundamental reform of the police.

As regards links to international organisations and eventual co-operation with foreign partners, AGORA is aware of certain limitations. For some organisations and persons, it would be a real risk, if not a threat, to work with foreign partners – not to mention being financially supported by a foreign source. Actually, AGORA is frequently exposed to attempts by the tax authorities and police, trying to find evidence of illegal activities and in that way to disrupt activities that are not welcome by everybody, since they may cause difficulties even to otherwise highly protected local elites.

The effectiveness of the defence work is demonstrated by the fact that the human rights defence jurists of Kazan have already won many cases. About 40 state and police officers have been found guilty of violations of the law, and about 3 million Russian roubles' compensation for damages has been ordered by Russian courts or by the ECHR in Strasbourg.

The **Kazan Human Rights Centre** (KHRC) was created in 2001 as an initiative of several experts, mostly jurists. Its main purpose is to contribute to better knowledge of citizens' rights among the population of the city of Kazan, protection of rights and freedoms of various groups of the population, to draw the attention of the general public and local authorities to socially important issues, and to create conditions for the development of civil society in the Tartar Republic.

The usual practice of the KHRC consists in independent investigation of cases opened against persons who have asked KHRC for legal

support. The investigation follows a methodology elaborated together with the Committee Against Torture of Nizhny Novgorod. It includes collection of facts from the persons involved, interviews of witnesses, request for all documents and search for evidence, all of which is then used in eventual preparation of defence materials and tactics. KHRC jurists then monitor the case and take part in all official sessions of the case, if there are any, and when the client is found not guilty and misuse of power can be proved, KHRC assists in opening a case for compensation damages to the client.

The KHRC is very active in its contacts with the media. In general, it publishes up to about 150 briefs or other publications per month, which represents the work of four persons [this year], and about 15 cases reported.

**Ecological centre "DRONT"** (DRONT) and the **Human Rights Center of Nizhny Novgorod** (HRC NN): The visit to the Ecological centre "DRONT" was prepared as a meeting with one of the most prominent personalities of the civil society of Nizhny Novgorod – Askhat Kajumov – who was also proposed by another well-known activist and organiser of the Human Rights Center of Nizhny Novgorod, Mr Sergej Shimovolos, who was out of town that week.

"Dront" is the name of a bird ("dodo"), which once lived on the island of Mauritius, but had no experience with human beings, so that it was exterminated very soon after Europeans discovered the island. Its name was chosen intentionally for an organisation whose primary interest consists

in actions and educational activities aimed at protecting the fauna and flora still surviving in the Nizhnegorodskoj Region of Russia.

However, it is not only the protection of nature that concerns DRONT. The centre is involved in processes related to general environmental protection, education about ecological issues, defence of the right to protect the environment, elaboration of documents setting standards for urban and region development, as well as expert reviewing of economic activities from the standpoint of environmental protection.

DRONT was involved in drafting the regional law on protection of urban greenery, which incorporates environmental impact assessments into official procedures and assists the population in environment protection activities.

Besides direct involvement in environmental protection issues, DRONT is active in ecological education, training and publications. It publishes a monthly journal "*Bereginja*" ["Tenderer"], which it distributes to schools and offices.

The activities of the Human Rights Center of Nizhny Novgorod are very similar to those described already during meetings with comparable organisations in Moscow and Kazan. Nevertheless, it has been made quite obvious that the central figure among the human rights activists of Nizhny Novgorod is Sergej Shimovolos, who was at the time in Ukraine, assisting there in the preparation of a project aimed at the support of human rights activists in Belarus.

## Tiráž

Činnost DEMAS je určována nezávisle a výhradně členskými organizacemi, nevyjadřuje žádné politické či ideologické postoje nebo zájmy jakékoli instituce.

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DEMAS  
Asociace pro podporu  
demokracie a lidských práv  
Pohořelec 6  
118 00 Praha 1

[info@demas.cz](mailto:info@demas.cz) / [www.demas.cz](http://www.demas.cz)  
IČO: 75156539 / DIČ: CZ75156539

*Správní rada:*  
Vladimír Bartovic (místopředseda),  
Igor Blaževič, Jakub Klepal (předseda),  
Monika MacDonagh-Pajerová,  
František Mikš, Alice Savovová

*Ředitelka sekretariátu:*  
Sabina Dvořáková

*Členské organizace DEMAS:*  
Agora Central Europe  
Ano pro Evropu  
Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky  
Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury  
Člověk v tísni  
Europeum  
Nadace Forum 2000  
Občanské Bělorusko  
PASOS  
Respekt institut  
Transitions

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