

## **CONTRIBUTING TO INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY: A EURASIAN EXAMPLE**

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### **Summary**

A Eurasian example uses the story of the development of the environmental movement in the former Soviet Union to demonstrate how indigenous NGOs supported by Western NGOs and funders are acting together to address local, regional and international environmental problems. The small grants and technical assistance program for NGOs run by ISAR: the Initiative for Social Action and Renewal in Eurasia, is used as a case

study to illustrate the way local and international NGOs can cooperate to achieve mutual ends, a process that can ultimately lead to global impacts.

### 1. Introduction

By joining forces with reform-minded individuals and community-based organizations in transitional countries international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) can speed the path to a more stable and equitable world. One example of the cooperation among indigenous NGOs and INGOs, and of the importance of Western assistance for such collaboration, can be found in the story of the environmental movement in the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

The FSU is made up of 12 of the 15 countries that were part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or USSR. The other three countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, known as the Baltic States, are now considered part of Central Europe. All 12 of the former Soviet republics, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, suffer from the political and economic problems of emerging from totalitarian rule and a centralized communist economic system. In the complicated transition to new political and economic structures, the citizens of these countries face tremendous uncertainties and a difficult struggle for survival.

All 12 countries lie well below the West in terms of per capita income, life expectancy, political freedoms and other such indicators of a nation’s standard of living. The graphs below give an indication of where they stand in relation to other developed and developing nations.

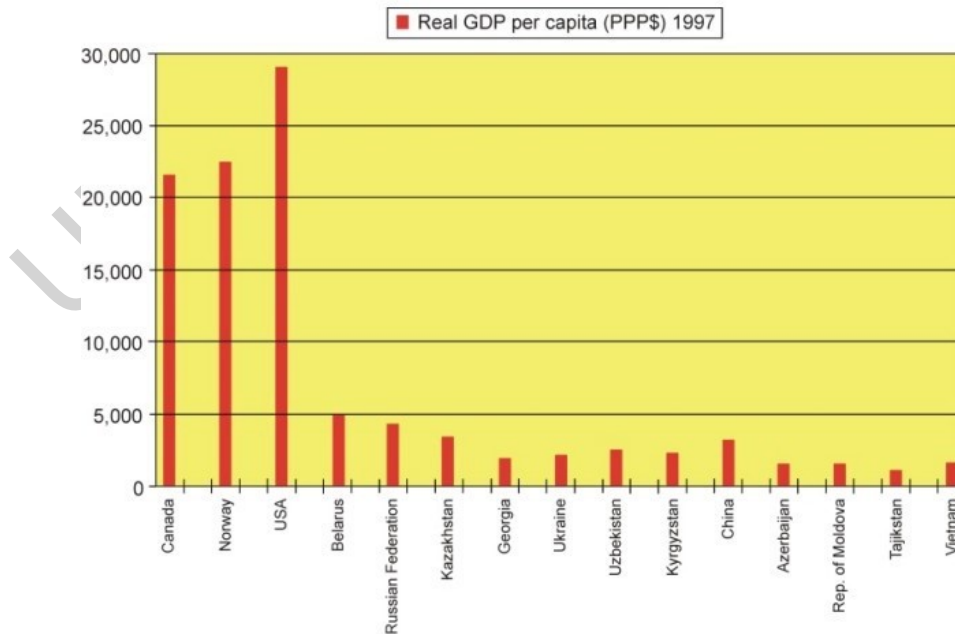


Figure 1. Real GDP per capita, selected countries, in PPP\$, 1997. The term PPP\$ is used by the Human Development Report to represent the GDP per capita of a country converted into US dollars on the basis of the purchasing power parity exchange rate.

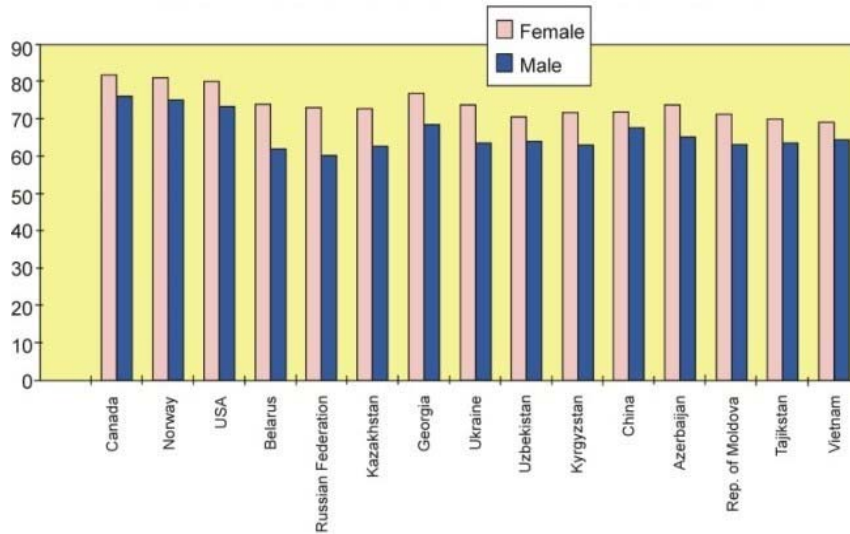


Figure 2. Life expectancy at birth, selected countries, female and male, in years, 1997

In the light of such grim statistics, it might appear that there is little that individual citizens and non-governmental organizations can do to improve the conditions they face and few ways that Western colleagues can help. A look at the environmental movement in the FSU, one of the most dynamic elements of the NGO sector, indicates that citizen activism encouraged by Western assistance is already serving as a positive force for change. The potential impact of citizen organizations in the FSU varies from country to country, depending on the political and legal conditions in each region. However, even in countries as repressive as Belarus and Turkmenistan or as unstable as Tajikistan, community-based environmental groups have been able to organize education and clean-up campaigns, nature conservation projects and health protection efforts. In less repressive countries, citizen activists, often with help from Western NGOs, are taking such forceful steps as challenging corrupt government agencies in court, publicizing illegal sales of natural resources in the media and organizing political referendums on health and pollution issues.

## 2. History of the Environmental Movement in the FSU

### 2.1 Early Days

The environmental movement in the FSU began in the 1980s as a mass movement attracting thousands of private citizens to protest gigantic, government construction projects, nuclear and other environmental disasters as well as egregious industrial pollution. It served as a lightning rod for pent-up protest of all kinds against the Soviet state. The 1986 Chernobyl accident in the Ukraine, for instance—the first Soviet environmental catastrophe that could not be kept hidden from the public, since radiation sensors in Europe—sounded the alert within hours after the accident-galvanized Ukrainian citizens to demonstrate against the government and seek reparations. In Armenia, citizen protests stopped construction on the Metzamor nuclear power plant after a massive earthquake struck the country in 1988. And in the same year, the Georgia greens rallied thousands to stop construction of a railway line along the Aragvi

River, source of 80% of Georgia's water supply, and subsequently halted a half-completed Soviet project to build seven hydroelectric dams on the Enguri River.

In the early days, the green movement was made up almost entirely of volunteers working together in loose combination according to individual interests or in response to a specific local crisis. Few organized NGOs existed, and even fewer made the effort to register officially with the government. The majority were located in major urban centers in European Russia and, of those, many had their roots in the quasi-governmental organizations of Soviet times.

Communications among activists depended on antiquated telephone and telegraph and a deteriorating postal service. Groups had very limited access to environmental information inside the country and virtually no access to people or information from the West. Since travel and other costs were low and labor was provided by volunteers, funding was not a major issue, and support was usually provided through in-kind contributions.

## **2.2 Post-1991 Collapse**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the movement began to change. Many of its most visible members were elected or appointed to public office, shifting their primary focus from environmental protection to politics. A particularly striking example of this transition is Zurab Zhvania, former leader of the Georgia Greens, who has become Speaker of the Parliament under Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze. In Ukraine, Yuri Scherbak, a leader of the post-Chernobyl environmental movement, became the country's Environmental Minister and later Ukraine's Ambassador to Israel, Ambassador to the US, and then Advisor on International Affairs to the Ukrainian President. One of the few who has gone from public office back to the environmental movement is Alexey Yablokov, an outspoken Russian Academician who became Boris Yeltsin's environmental advisor and member of Russia's National Security Council, but is now head of Russia's first independent environmental think tank, the Center for Russian Environmental Policy. These three men are just a few of the key players in the environmental movement of the 1980s who have gone on to leadership positions at the local, regional and national level.

Other factors changed the makeup of the movement as well. The end of the Soviet welfare state led to economic disruption and rising costs, which meant that the average citizen could no longer afford to devote much time to volunteer activities. Nationwide polls that had pegged environmental concerns as a top priority for the Soviet public in the late 1980s saw them drop to tenth or twelfth place in the face of skyrocketing inflation and industrial collapse. As a result, the movement became smaller and more focused, made up largely of natural scientists concerned about long-term environmental protection rather than protesting some immediate catastrophe. However, the experience of organizing mass protests gave the leaders of second-generation environmental NGOs a head start as compared with FSU NGOs concerned about other issues, and environmental NGOs were quickly identified as among the most active and fundable when western support became available in 1993.

Sophisticated urban organizations such as the Biodiversity Conservation Center in Moscow or the Noah's Arc Center for the Recovery of Endangered Species in Tbilisi, Georgia, for instance, over time won grants from funders such as the MacArthur Foundation, the Global Environmental Facility and the United Nations Development Programme. The grant money allowed them to develop paid staffs and professional expertise, such as consulting on international projects, for which they could, in some cases, charge fees. At the other end of the spectrum, grassroots groups inspired by greater political freedom and led by determined doctors, journalists or teachers tried to address critical local pollution or health problems and fill the gap left by the collapse of state institutions. Some of these efforts also gained western allies and support enabling them to expand and reach out to others (see later).

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### Biographical Sketch

**Eliza Kellogg Klose** is Executive Director of ISAR: Initiative for Social Action and Renewal in Eurasia. ISAR is a nonprofit organization, based in Washington, DC, which works to promote citizen participation

and the non-governmental sector in the countries of the former Soviet Union. With funding from USAID and private foundations, ISAR runs a small grants and technical assistance program that supports NGOs throughout the FSU. Operating through field offices in Moscow, Novosibirsk and Vladivostok (Russia), Kiev (Ukraine), Baku (Azerbaijan) and Almaty and Atyrau (Kazakhstan), the program has awarded over US\$5 million in grants since its inception in 1993. ISAR also works in partnership with Horizonti, the foundation for the Third Sector in Tbilisi, formerly ISAR–Georgia. A Russian speaker, Eliza lived in Moscow from 1977–1981, and served as informal interpreter for her husband, who was serving as Moscow bureau chief for the Washington Post. She is the translator of Lydia Chukovskaya’s memoir of pre-revolutionary literary life *To the Memory of Childhood* and the corrected edition of Chukovskaya’s novel *Sofia Petrovna*, an underground dissident classic from the Stalinist era. In 1987, Eliza was aide and interpreter to George Soros on his initial fact-finding mission to Moscow, which led to the establishment of the Soros Foundation–Soviet Union. Eliza holds a BA from Radcliffe College, in English literature. She is a member of the international board of advisors of the Center for Russian Environmental Policy and of the boards of the Winston Foundation for World Peace and the Pacific Environment and Resources Center.