

„Civil Society and Post-Chernobyl Development in Belarus“

**Second Workshop of the International Research Group “Politics and Society after Chernobyl”
Minsk, April 1-5, 2009**

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After the successful official opening of the international research project „Politics and Society after Chernobyl“¹ at the Center for Research on Contemporary History Potsdam in November 2008 (see Bulletin No. 43-44/2008), the second workshop of the project team took place in Minsk, Belarus, on April 1-5, 2009.

As already practiced in Potsdam, the workshop at the Minsk International Educational Centre “Johannes Rau” (IBB) incorporated both public events and internal project discussion.

The gathering of the young scientists started with an internal debate over some fundamental works on civil society, the connecting issue of the several individual projects. The academic discussion on the texts was full of discoveries. Project scholars shared many different per-

1| The joint project of the Center for Research on Contemporary History Potsdam, the Master's Program Eastern European Studies of the Elite Network of Bavaria, the European Humanities University Vilnius/Minsk, and the Ukraine National University Kiev-Mohyla Academy is part of the initiative of the Volkswagen Foundation “Unity in Diversity. Foundation and Prerequisites for an Expanded Europe.”

spectives on the readings and built meaningful bridges between their own work and the works of Kocka², Havel³, Petryna⁴, Habermas and Foucault⁵. Each of the authors contributed their own diverse angle to the discussion on the contemporary societies in Belarus, Ukraine and Germany; as well as the dynamics of socio-political change after the Chernobyl catastrophe in each of them.

There was one common thread throughout the texts and discussion, which is worth elaborating upon: the notions of the “public”, “public space” and “publicity”. Discussants explored the line among these concepts and agreed to develop a suitable definition of each for use in their joint work on civil society development in Eastern Europe after Chernobyl.

In particular, the fellows put forward a number of questions which would help them build a common logic in their works and relate to the notions of public space and/or publicity and provide a comparative perspective on these matters across

2| Jurgen Koka, *Evropejskoe grazhdanskoe obshchestvo: istoricheskie korni i sovremennye perspektivy na Vostoke i Zapade*, in: „Neprikosnovennyj zapas“ 2003, No.2(28).

3| Vaclav Havel, *Anti-Political Politics*, Text of an address forwarded to the University of Toulouse, 1984.

4| Adriana Petryna, *Sarcophagus: Chernobyl in Historical Light*, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol 10, No.2, *Anthropologies of the Body*. (May, 1995), pp.196-220; Adriana Petryna, *Biological Citizenship: The Science and Politics of Chernobyl-Exposed Populations*, *Osiris* 2004, 19, pp. 250-265.

5| Bent Flyvbjerg, *Habermas i Fuko teoretiki grazhdanskogo obshchestva*, *Sociologicheskie issledovanija* 2000, No. 2. pp. 127-136.

the countries, for example: Was there more than one public space/publicity in the Soviet Union? To what extent did this (these) publicity(ies)/public space(s) had influence on civil society development and social mobilization after Chernobyl? What kind of public space existed in the Chernobyl times? Overall, the texts were a good continuation of the project's theoretical search for common ground and notions in the research of six different scholars, focusing on one joint topic – political and social transformation after Chernobyl.

The theoretical discussion was followed by the first public event with respect to the more practical aspects of the topic: a panel discussion with prominent Belarusian scientists and practitioners on the topic "Chernobyl Experience in Belarusian politics and society". The panel, organised by the research group and the IBB in co-operation with the Belarusian internet journal "Novaya Evropa," took place on April 2nd. Thereby the International Educational Center created a comfortable space for an open discussion on Chernobyl issues in Belarus and gave floor to different "voices" to be heard. The panel with representatives of a national NGO (Tamara Belookaya, an expert and a representative of the Belarusian Committee "Chernobyl's Children"), international organisation (Anna Litvinova, Project Officer UNDP Belarus), international foundation (Sergey Tarasuk, Agriculture Development International Fund), state bodies (Zoya Trofimchik, Russian and Belarusian Centre of Information on Overcoming the Chernobyl Aftermath), and a German research institute (Melanie Arndt, researcher and project manager of the Chernobyl research project, ZZf) laid

the basis for a very intensive and multi-sided discussion. Such debates are very unique under the current political situation in Belarus. It was also a great opportunity to present the joint international research project on Chernobyl for a wider public.

The lively and partly very emotional discussion (moderated by Astrid Sahm, the director of the IBB, political scientist and member of the project's academic board) was focused on the following topics: health of current and future populations; impact of environment on population; connection between Chernobyl and health issues in Belarus; strategies and activities of international organisations on Chernobyl, and problems of scientific research related to Chernobyl after-effects. Furthermore, the efficacy of information policy/strategy concerning Chernobyl issues such as health, safe habitation, decontamination of agricultural produce were discussed. Very controversial opinions were expressed by the panellists and the audience concerning the construction of the first nuclear power plant in Belarus. The panelists and the audience expressed their biggest concerns regarding the absence or ignorance of independent research and data on Chernobyl related issues such as the evacuated and resettled population, and the absence of a comprehensive approach towards rehabilitation of population affected by Chernobyl.

As suggestions for future work on Chernobyl issues, several aspects were raised, for example education of professionals in administrative bodies, mass media, agriculture, etc. as well as the population. The education should be aimed at turning the inhabitants of af-

fectured territories into (radiological) competent, active participants of the rehabilitation process. Accumulated experience and data on the Chernobyl aftermath should be analysed and sum-

marised and an international exchange of information on suitable practices and academic knowledge should be organised.



Tamara Belookaja (Belarussisches Komitee „Die Kinder Tschernobyls“), Dr. Astrid Sahn (IBB Minsk), Dr. Melanie Arndt (ZZF Potsdam) und Sergej Tarasjuk (Internat. Stiftung zur Entwicklung der ländlichen Gegend)

The main aim of the panel discussion - public and open exchange of different points of view – indeed, was achieved, and could be seen as mentionable success.

The following day was filled with an internal review of the progress of individual projects, in particular the dissertation project of Alexander Dalhouski on petitions after Chernobyl in Belarus, and Evgenia Ivanova on gender aspects after the nuclear catastrophe. Dalhouski gave an overview over new findings in the archives and the general setting of the period analysed

by him. Ivanova introduced a piece of theoretical work about the relation between ideology that produces subjects through the moment of interpellation (Althusser, Butler) and the feeling of guilt that is crucial for the subjects' formation process. Whether this theoretical approach can be relevant to the studies on Chernobyl was one of the research questions she raised. As a guest Anna Shevchenko presented her work done in a UNDP project, for example a collection of fairytales on Chernobyl written by children from different countries. The audience dis-

cussed her idea for a dissertation project on cultural rehabilitation of territories, suffered from Chernobyl. Shevchenko plans to explore the strategies of psychological and cultural rehabilitation of Chernobyl territories as well as the psychological peculiarities of people, living on these territories.

The third day ended with another public event – a round table in cooperation with the Belarusian internet journal “Novaya Evropa” on the issues of public sphere in Belarus. Together with Belarusian historians, philosophers and journalists the participants of the workshop discussed the scopes of publicity in the Belarusian Soviet Republic and contemporary Belarus. A transcript of the discussion (in Russian) can be found online at: http://n-europe.eu/article/2009/04/26/mezhdu_chastnym_i_publicnym_obshchestvo_i_politika_posle_chernobylya.

The workshop was concluded with a field trip to two very different and specific places of Belarusian remem-

brance culture(s). The research team visited the Kuropaty memorial and the Stalin Line. While the Soviet killing fields of Kuropaty lack of Belarusian state support, the recently constructed Stalin Line was generously financed by the state. The unreflected, one-sided exhibition on Soviet heroism and the display of a Stalin statue caused acrimonious discussions between research team members and a guide at the museum complex. The excursion was an important experience for all researchers both in terms of scientific reflection of contemporary processes in Belarus as well as in terms of team building.

The next workshop will take place in December 2009.

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