

RUSSIA

TRANSPARENT COOPERATION ACROSS TRANSPARENT BORDERS



Darya Akhutina, director general of the Norden Association for cooperation with North European countries, answered questions from the Amber Bridge.

What is Norden Association?

The association was founded in 1996 and united four friendship societies which previously were a part of the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies. At that time in all northern countries except for Finland friendship societies with the Soviet Union ceased to exist. A new format of public diplomacy was necessary which would enrich previous experience with new interaction methods which emerged in mid-90s at the turn of the centuries.

From 2001 Norden, as an inter-regional public association, is the national coordinator of the annual forum of non-governmental organizations of the Baltic Sea region. Since that time our activities cover not only northern countries and northwest of Russia but also members of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

In Russia we cooperate with regional non-profit organizations from Murmansk to Kaliningrad. We provide information and logistic support to them. I am not talking about big and well-established organizations but rather small and inexperienced civil societies for which such support is vital. They ask us to find partners for them and share reasonable experience in project implementation. It is sometimes only half-way to get

money for a project as you have to also properly report to the grantor and then keep the launched project in your hands.

You say "we" and "us". Where and how many are you?

We have partnership organizations in every region. They represent the interests of the association and its projects in the Russian northwest. Such organizations exist in Petrozavodsk, Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, Kaliningrad, Pskov, Novgorod, and Vyborg. I want to stress that we are not a Petersburg organization, but an inter-regional one. We operate as a normal public organization and we have seven permanent staff. Besides, we annually engage 20-30 experts to implement projects as we cannot be equally competent in all spheres of activities.

Today there is a vital issue of financial checks which Russian competent bodies carry out in non-profit and non-governmental organizations. Did they check you as you also spend money from foreign sources?

The information about foreign financing surprises me because it reports only the very fact and the amount. But nobody says what the amount comprises. Most financing of non-government organizations in the Russian northwest

comes from joint funds. We have to remember that Russia and the European Union have a joint North Dimension program which includes four partnerships. In particular, we formally received financing from Brussels for our biggest project of cultural heritage of the Viking epoch. The Russian Federation invested 122 million euro into a common fund - the European neighborhood and partnership instrument. All the projects are approved by the Steering Committee, i.e. by a supervising council of experts

which also unites representatives of Russian authorities. The Nordic Council of Ministers is a separate source of financing. It interacts with the government of the Russian Federation since 1995 and supports numerous projects which are of significance also for Russian regional authorities.



Darya Akhutina, director general of the Norden Association for cooperation with North European



In this context I would like to draw your attention to the radical difference of regional cooperation of public organizations from any other one. There is no protection of interests of a party. We are united by territory, we breathe one and the same air, drink the same water and suffer from the same diseases. We live along 1200-kilometer long land border in the area of the Baltic Sea and naturally everything of our concern is of concern for our neighbors. There are no political interests except for the interest of any country in having a calm social climate along its borders.

What are you mostly proud of in the past seventeen years?

In the life of any person and in activities of any organization there are many sides - much more than only black and white. We are specifically proud that we still exist. There are few non-profit organizations which emerged in the '90s and are still alive, operating and expanding. We are proud of our team and partnership network which operates in eleven regions of the country.

In the context of current eleventh forum I cannot but remember the second forum held in 2002 here in St. Petersburg. Had we failed to hold it the forum of non-governmental organizations of the Baltic Sea region would never become an annual event. The first forum was held in 2001 in Lubeck during the German presidency in the CBSS upon the initiative of the German foreign ministry. The organizers viewed it as a single event. The second forum held in Petersburg in 2002 was due to the goodwill of the city administration and the Russian foreign ministry. Today many people know the Norden Association and our abilities. At that time it was a major risk to stake on us. I will never forget the huge eyes of Hans-Jürgen Heimsoeth who a year before headed the committee of senior



officials from Germany and held the forum in Lubeck. He arrived as a guest and told me: "Darya, I was backed by the German foreign ministry. Tell me how you managed to cope with the task?" We organized both forums thanks to non-governmental organizations. Naturally, the foreign ministry provided political and moral support but our financial resources are very limited.

If we go back to the previous question I have to mention another proud achievement - it is due to our merited accountant that in all the years of existence we were only once fined for three rubles. You have to remember that we pay money to western experts and that we are an employer.

Now it is a bewildering question. If your association has existed for seventeen years now why don't you pay attention to your Internet website? Long-living organizations produce respectable sites in the final run.

It is a very laborious process. Even if you try to blog and communicate in Facebook and Twitter it will take much time and big human resource. We tried to do it, but it is very costly. We are currently entrusted with the implementation of a major European project called Common Historic Past for Common Future which will launch an open-sky archaeological museum of the Viking epoch in Batetsky district of Novgorod region. In this project major museums of the Viking epoch - Gotlands Museum (Sweden) and the museum in the town of Vejle (Denmark), as well as leading Russian archaeologists and historians cooperate with us.

Thank you for the interview. I wish you luck in you interesting but restless mission!

Dmitry Sokolov,
for Amber Bridge


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