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## **Helping Academics in Central Eastern Europe — the Research Support Scheme**

This paper describes the activities of the Research Support Scheme, an international programme promoting the best scholars in Central Eastern Europe. It is illustrated by three projects devoted to the issue of the development of rural areas.

The finalization of several dozen research projects within the framework of the Research Support Scheme (RSS), an international programme which has for over ten years been supporting research development in the field of social science and the humanities, providing researchers with financial and academic assistance was expected to close in June 2002.

The origins of the programme date back to 1991. That was when the Open Society Institute (OSI) at the Central European University in Budapest decided about the necessity of implementing a programme which would support the exploration of new research issues, connected with the formation of young democracies in Central Eastern Europe and the process of their integration with the fabric of the European Union. The RSS was only one of many initiatives undertaken by the OSI-Budapest.<sup>1</sup> The Institute is currently running programmes such as: The Arts and Culture Network Policy, The Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, The Network Media Programme and The EU Accession Monitoring Programme.

The programme of the RSS was primarily aimed at representatives of the social sciences and the humanities. The issues proposed by the RSS Committee, oscillating around questions concerning the system transformation and European integration were divided into over a dozen subject areas.

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<sup>1</sup> OSI-Budapest belongs to the international NGO network in over 50 countries throughout the world, created by the American philanthropist George Soros (The Soros Foundation). Together with the main branch of OSI in New York, OSI-Budapest provides support to organizations in Central Eastern Europe, Mongolia, the Russian Federation, South and West Africa.

I shall mention a few. The sociological projects were concerned with the issue of participation and social exclusion, institutional changes as well as the issue of national and ethnic identity. Social policy projects related to the problems of a wealthy nation: the social welfare system, re-qualification, employment policy, the health service and the salary system. Whereas demographic and socio-ecology projects raised phenomena connected with the local development of towns and rural areas. Political scientists were offered work dealing with issues concerned with the developing civic society.

Projects which were carried out were of great significance. Firstly, the similarity between experiences of communities of the former Eastern Bloc, created opportunities for carrying out effective comparative research, generally concerning the most serious social problems, such as: poverty, education in rural areas or discrimination of women. Conclusions provided essential information which would enable better solutions to these issues. Secondly, the fact that the authors of the projects were also participants in the process of transformation also had an influence on the quality of portraying the analysed issues. The scholars gave a detailed presentation of those problems which could seem incomprehensible to researchers from outside a given cultural circle. Thirdly, the expansion of the research perspective (clarifying local phenomena at pan-European level) brought phenomena arising at regional level closer to a wider audience stretching beyond the European continent. Cooperation with a group of world specialists (laureates and scientists working with them came from 47 countries), strengthened their feeling of belonging to the international academic community which had previously been weakened by political divisions.

The significance of the programmes was exceptional, both in content and method. An essential condition of taking part in the international competition was submitting one's application constructed according to rigorous methodological requirements. Applications had to contain detailed assumptions of the programme, including: the aim of the project, expected effects, budget, duration, number of participants, ways of obtaining data. The awarded projects were selected in a two-stage competition, the jury of which consisted of members of the RSS committee (the Committee was headed by Professor Gabriel Fragnière, with Professor Andrzej Rychard as his deputy). The purpose of this restrictive procedure was essentially to choose the best projects. This was meant to be the ideal type of methodological standards, essential during the construction of future research programmes. 12,755 applications were made to the RSS in 9 campaigns. Research grants were obtained by only a quarter of the proposed projects (individual or group) i.e. 3032, which confirms the high standard of requirements imposed on the participants. During the two last campaigns approximately 200 applications came from Ukraine, Hungary, Bulgaria, over

150 from the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania. However, Russia was the unquestioned leader submitting over 760 projects, over 100 of which were rewarded (of the remaining countries around 20 projects each).

Most of the authors of the awarded projects were young researchers. For many of them, funds allocated by the RSS were the only opportunity of carrying out research work. These funds amounted to 5608 USD per researcher which was indeed an attractive sum. As Professor Gabriel Fragnière pointed out the allocated grants enabled the preservation of the innovative attributes of the research proposed by the young academics. The activity of the foundation contributed to the development of the research of teams taking part in the project. In addition, the financial prizes awarded by the RSS enabled the carrying out of research work in one's own country without having to go abroad.

The most interesting of the awarded projects were published in the foundation magazine (Research Support Scheme Annual Chronicle). I would like to present three of them which I consider to be particularly noteworthy. They raise the most significant questions connected with the current problems in rural areas, such as: environmental protection and cultural heritage, reconstruction of local community ties and regional identity as well as searching for non-agricultural sources of income. They are interesting examples of local development strategy, constructed within the paradigm of balanced development which is to date the best remedy for rural and small town problems in the region of Central Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The first of these is the Belarussian project *The Concept of Eco-Village 2000 for Belarus*, presented by Evgeny Shirokov. The ecological village concept assumes the implementation by the inhabitants of renewable sources of energy and differentiation of production through the use of advanced and innovative technological solutions. Alternative agriculture is therefore the way of developing the Belarussian (and other) countryside. Innovative building must first of all take advantage of local resources. Referring to the results of technological research carried out over almost three years, the author of the programme suggests using straw bales and straw clay as new building materials. Research results show that straw bales are an excellent building material, which successfully insulates against low temperatures and damp as well as being light and inexpensive. Although the standard of buildings constructed with the use of such materials may differ from the quality of brick-built houses, they may bring great advan-

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<sup>2</sup> The remaining projects concerned issues such as: the institutional aspect of the transformation of Czech agriculture, unemployment of rural women in Siberia, the attitude towards military service in areas of rural post-Soviet Russia, social phobias in rural areas as well as ways of solving social problems (so-called social agriculture).

tages. As an example, Evgeny Shirokov suggests shelters for refugees and the homeless as well as farm buildings.

Apart from innovative building technologies, the project also assumes a change in the way of acquiring energy, departing from traditional methods in favour of renewable sources. The energy of the wind, water and sun may be used by means of windmills, watermills and solar batteries. The proposed solutions do not require great financial resources, yet considering the current political and economic conditions in Belarus, their implementation may face certain barriers.

The project of the Russian group of academics under the leadership of Vladimir Kikunov *Sustainable Development Model for Small Northern Cities (exemplified by the Murmansk and Kirovsk Region) based on the pattern of the Sub-Polar Cities of Russia and Scandinavia* also assumes sustainable development. According to the researchers, the current socio-economic situation in Northern Russia is far from balanced. Economic conditions are hard and the environment protection policy does not comply with the specific requirements of the Arctic environment. The researched region covers over half of the territory of Russia yet it produces only one fifth of the national income. The economic reforms of the 1990s resulted in the drastic growth of unemployment, a drop in living standards, a growth in deprivation of the inhabitants of the region as well as migration to larger urban areas in search of employment. The lack of a suitable state policy led to the ecological degradation of the region.

According to the authors of the strategy, the solution to the above problems is an environment friendly (ecophyl) model of management, corresponding to the traditional way of utilizing nature, applied by the indigenous inhabitants of the region. As in Evgeny Shirokov's programme, the authors of this project emphasize the use of alternative sources of energy. This is to be supplied by home windmills, solar batteries and small water generators.

Apart from problems connected with environmental protection, the programme also raises social issues. The level of regional development depends on the existence of a suitable social infrastructure. One of the essential duties for the inhabitants of these areas is the implementation of the so-called environment tax, imposed on products which directly or indirectly threaten the natural environment. The restructurization of industry is essential, in other words, the limitation of mining iron ore, which damages not only the regional eco-system but also burdens the economy of the entire country. New sources of income may be found in agricultural occupations which continue to be carried out by the local population, such as: reindeer breeding, fishing or the cultivation of grain and fruit. Considering the qualities of the Arctic landscape, agro-tourism can also provide jobs.

The third project to be awarded by the RSS foundation was David Melu's research programme concerning the transformation process in rural Georgia which took place there during the past 10 years (*Rural Georgia in Change*). The project dealt with the identification of changes in socio-economic relations, the investigation of forms of adaptation of rural inhabitants and the evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of activity of the local government.

Three typical Georgian villages were selected for the research. The economic base of traditional Georgian agriculture were small farms. Their collectivization began during the period of Soviet power, which meant not only the degradation of traditional agriculture but also the ruin of the social infrastructure.

After the fall of the USSR began the tedious period of reconstructing the Georgian countryside, the main course of action being the development of small businesses (including small farms). The agricultural reform (decollectivization) meant handing over land to the peasant without the right of sale. Unfortunately, the lack of appropriate social institutions, complicated the transformation process. The social void which occurred as a result of the liquidation of the Soviet market, the growth of expenses for production and the liquidation of sovkhozes was conducive to corruption and the deepening of differences in income of specific social groups.

Georgian society worked out three forms of adapting to the new social conditions: migration to larger towns or abroad (this affected young people in particular and meant the ageing of the countryside), starting a private business and re-qualification. The process of the restructurization of agriculture, including non-agricultural sources of income, is difficult due to the lack of a suitable infrastructure — mainly credits and aid institutions as well as the inefficiency of the local authorities. The current policy of subsidizing agricultural products calls for improvement. Supplements should only be allocated to selected products.

The authors of all the projects unanimously underline the importance of taking two criteria into consideration when constructing a local development strategy: the direction of changes and their duration. The transformation process should begin in those sectors which bring a fast return on investments such as agro-tourism. Secondly, transformation should be a gradual process rather than a radical change. Finally the solution of the problems facing rural areas is only possible through the cooperation of various political, economic and academic institutions. Knowledge together with experience are essential in order to provide the most effective solutions.

Since the foundation of the RSS in 1991 the situation of the countries in Central Eastern Europe has undergone fundamental changes. Access to the network of western foundations is growing. Local possibilities of doing research are improving partly due to programmes such as the RSS.

The experience gained during the RSS will be used to carry out a similar project in South Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Mongolia (Higher Education Support Programme) which are currently struggling with problems similar to those Central Eastern Europe faced 10 years ago. Let us hope that thanks to this initiative another 4500 academics get support as in the case of the RSS.