

BELARUS

"FROM ORIGINS TO DEVELOPMENT" – PROJECT AIMING TO BOOST RURAL TOURISM IN BELARUS

Text by Elena Daneiko

Civil Society. Dialogue for Progress

The development of tourism in rural communities has been on the governmental agenda in Belarus for more than a year, yet there are still insufficient financial resources to support these sorts of initiatives in rural areas. *The project "From Origins to Development" which is financed by EU regional funds* will help to support the initiatives of residents from the Slavgorod district in the Mogilev region to develop rural tourism.

A correspondent from the "Civil Society. Dialogue for Progress" spoke to the participants and experts of the project to find out why and for whom this project is important, how it is being implemented and what expecta-

tions Slavgorod's residents have.

The objective of the project "From Origins to Development" is to improve public-private partnerships aimed at the development of tourism based on the cultural traditions, handicrafts and natural heritage of Mogilev's Slavgorod district. It also aims to improve the welfare of local residents and increase the inflow of investment into the region.

This objective fully coincides with the aims of the *"Renaissance-Agro Foundation"* - an organisation established by Slavgorod's residents in 2007 to encourage small-farm entrepreneurship, which recently received a grant in

the framework of the EU Rural Development Fund.

“We decided to emphasise tourism in the development of this region,” says the Project Coordinator, Vitaly Varabey. “With its unique natural heritage and enthusiastic local population, the area has much potential. It is home to two rivers, a forest and the Blue Krynica, a water source deemed unique by hydrogeologists.”

Besides these attractions, *the Slavgorod district is home to a local cheese-making industry.* For several years, the cheesemakers have participated in festivals and fairs across Belarus, where they sell their produce and invite people to food tastings. They are also planning to organise culinary lessons for those wishing to learn the craft.

“We must support local residents in their willingness to develop infrastructure for tourism by teaching them best practices and encouraging those who have not yet found their place in this process,”

says Mr. Varabey. “Since the beginning of the project in June 2015, seven

groups have been created to match the activities of the project.”

Seven Initiatives

As noted by Vitaly Varabey, tourists can visit a number of historic sights in the Slavgorod region and take advantage of its outdoors by biking, rafting or trekking through nature reserves which have preserved a unique flora and fauna. Those interested in gastronomy are invited to attend culinary lessons among the cheese artisans in the region. Ethno-tourism is expected to develop, attracting connoisseurs of local legends and ancient rites.

The tourism initiatives organise excursions to meet with residents of the rural communities in the Slavgorod region who would like to demonstrate their home-made produce. The development of rural tourism also supports the development of farmsteads that already welcome tourists.

Seven initiatives have been created in the framework of the project. They will become a part of the District Public Council’s programme for the development of tourism. The Council, in turn, will develop a strategy and a program for the development of tourism in the Slavgorod District. If approved by the District’s executive body, tenders will be launched to select the initiatives.

“In this way, we plan to develop public-private partnerships and encourage local residents to consider self-employment,” claims the Project Coordinator, Vitaliy Varabey. “After all, few companies in Slavgorod employ locals, yet the development of entrepreneurship is no less important than the development of tourist infrastructure. Our task is to show people that they can simultaneously work, and make money on their own, whilst also doing something good, such as developing the infrastructure for tourism in Belarus.”

“We try to grow entrepreneurs”

“It seems that a number of residents in Belarus’ rural areas would like to break away from their usual pattern of activities in Slavgorod”, says Alexey Rimsha, a specialist in the field of tourism and environmental management. He currently takes part in the project by training people to create hiking trails. A few days ago he returned from a kayaking trip:

“We’ve already held two trainings within the framework of the project,

which has allowed us to develop two additional routes – one for bike tours and another for rafting on the local Pronya and Sozh rivers. I try to make sure that our lessons teach participants to come up with an interesting route, promote it as a tourist attraction and potentially create their own commercial organization,” says Alexey Rimsha.

Mr. Rimsha plans to continue consulting for the project by offering his services to enthusiasts wishing to acquire a new occupation for themselves. In the meantime, he believes most of the participants see this as an ‘extracurricular’ activity and are generally optimistic about the promotion and success of the project.

People of all ages are willing to try out new things - there are 25 and 50 year olds. However, Mr. Rimsha believes that age hardly matters. What counts is a person’s willingness and skills.

He believes those most likely to succeed are generally in good physical shape, have a knowledge and passion for the nature and history of their region and are enthusiastic to work with other people.

“We are trying to forge entrepreneurs through this project. Our main goal is to awaken initiative. In the eyes of the training’s participants, fire appeared before it even started. The new business managed to inspire some, but it failed with others,” admits Alex.

Cheese-makers are among those who need no further persuasion.

Cheese-makers from Slavgorod have high hopes and big plans for the future

“The club already has 15 members and we have even bigger plans for the

future,” says Galina Taran, leader of the cheesemaking club. *“We experiment with different cheese making recipes from Belarus and around the world, and routinely interview elderly villagers who have themselves collected ancient recipes.* Our cheese produce has featured in many gastronomic festivals across Belarus, including the capital Minsk. The Italian visitors liked our cheeses and we would like to showcase our produce in festivals in Italy.”

In the context of the "From Origins to Development" project, the cheesemaker’s club plans to launch a call for





applications to select an instructor who will lead the training sessions. The club would also like to use the funds to invest in vacuum packing and branding that would give the product a longer shelf-life and a more attractive appearance in the eyes of consumers,” says Galina Taran.

Among their high expectations for the project, club members are hoping to buy a trailer-wagon with refrigeration facilities in order to transport and present their produce at different cheese festivals.

Finally, they would like to obtain a patent on the name "Gaspadarchy

” together with the necessary certification to sell their produce across retail stores and restaurants in the country.

“As regards the project’s effect on entrepreneurship in the region, it is likely that cheese-making will become the primary source of income for some households in the region,” says Galina Taran. “Meanwhile, however, cheese-making remains a passion for the majority of club members, who themselves are veterinarians, teachers and pensioners.”

"The focus is on sustainability and safety"

Assessing the project's development prospects, the chairman of *the Belarusian NGO "Holiday Village"*, Valeriya Klitsunova, underlines the importance of sustaining the project after its implementation period expires.

Another question is whether tourists will travel to Slavgorod, which has been contaminated with radiation following the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. As Alex Rimsha notes, one of the bicycle routes developed during the training sessions runs through forest areas where radiation levels continue to exceed the norm.

Valeria Klitsunova, however, believes this circumstance is unlikely to stop tourists who are informed and accompanied by an experienced instructor.

"Believe me, we travelled to areas where the radiation level far exceeded the norm, and we were accompanied by informed Western experts who value and protect themselves.

The one rule to keep in mind is to carry an individual radiation detector.

Food controls are also better enforced here than in Minsk. Finally, it is of course necessary to provide tourists with advanced warning concerning areas contaminated with radiation."



This publication does not represent the official view of the EC or the EU institutions. The EC accepts no responsibility or liability whatsoever with regard to its content.



CIVIL SOCIETY.
DIALOGUE FOR PROGRESS