



LITHUANIA: LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE
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Final Report

SUMMARY

Between July 1995 and February 1998, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted activities to develop and implement a local government assistance program in Lithuania. NDI's program was designed primarily to encourage local government officials in three cities to implement procedures to promote public participation in the local decision-making process. NDI also sponsored a seminar on citizen participation for local officials and NGO activists from across Lithuania and published an accompanying handbook for their use. Much of NDI's program was conducted in partnership with the Municipal Training Center in Kaunas, Lithuania. Following the end of USAID funding, NDI has continued the program with funds from the National Endowment for Democracy after USAID funds were expended.

BACKGROUND

Since its independence in 1991, Lithuania has struggled with the political and economic consequences resulting from the breakup of the Soviet Union. At the forefront of the Baltic independence movement, Lithuania was also one of the first counties in Eastern Europe to experience a Communist backlash when the coalition of nationalist-conservatives that had led the country since independence was defeated in 1992 by the communist successor Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party. Over the next four years, political and economic reform stagnated, and Lithuania was generally seen as lagging behind its Baltic neighbors, Estonia and Latvia. During national elections in October and November 1996, however, nationalist-conservative parties scored a decisive victory, winning a majority of seats in

parliament.

Lithuania's political shift was foreshadowed by the outcome of local government elections in March 1995, which resulted in nationalist-conservative administrations in most of the country's 56 municipal districts. The elections were the first since independence and brought in a new generation of local leaders. However, the ability of local authorities to function effectively has remained limited by their continuing financial dependence on the national government and widespread distrust of public officials.

NDI's Previous Activities in Lithuania

NDI has conducted programs in the Baltic States since 1991. In 1994, NDI received a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to strengthen the development of local government in Estonia and Lithuania. During 1994, NDI concentrated its activities in Estonia, where the Institute began working with local officials in several cities on developing procedures to increase public participation in local government, following local elections in March 1995. NDI shifted the focus of its program to Lithuania.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of NDI's program was to increase and regularize public participation in local decision-making in Lithuania. Specifically, NDI's activities were designed to:

- ! Encourage local officials in three (initially four) cities to institute procedures that guarantee citizens regular opportunities to participate in setting local policy.
- ! Increase the participation of community organizations and individual citizens in local government.
- ! Assist the development of indigenous expertise that can be used to train current and future local government leaders in the area of citizen participation.
- ! Introduce preliminary citizen participation assistance to communities outside the target cities.

ACTIVITIES

In late July 1995, NDI conducted a mission to Lithuania to assess the status of local government and identify programming needs. NDI's representatives met with local officials in nine cities, as well as with government and NGO representatives. Based on the results of the mission, NDI decided to open a small office in Kaunas and to concentrate its activities there and in three other cities, Alytus, Ukmerge, and Utena.

In November 1995, NDI hired Mark Levinson, a former local government official from the United States, to be its field representative in Lithuania. That month, Levinson and NDI Program Officer Gabriel Hütter traveled to Lithuania to establish NDI's base of operations. During the visit, it was determined that NDI would work in part out of the offices of the Municipal Training Center (MTC) at Kaunas Technological University (KTU), which provides education and training to local officials throughout Lithuania. Consultations with KTU faculty, MTC staff, and local government officials in Kaunas and Alytus allowed NDI to develop a set of initial program activities.

In late January 1996, Levinson opened NDI's office in Kaunas. In the next weeks, Levinson began meeting with local officials in Kaunas to develop a citizen participation program for the city. To facilitate the meetings, Levinson produced a brochure entitled "Communicating with Citizens: An Introduction to Citizen Participation." Levinson also began teaching an undergraduate course on citizen participation as part of the public administration program at KTU.

During the first half of 1996, NDI assisted the Kaunas public information department in defining activities for a recently established citizens' advisory committee and developing a bi-monthly newsletter featuring articles on local issues and the work of the administration. Composed of ten volunteers appointed by the mayor, the committee's basic mandate was to inform the administration of problems in the community and recommend solutions. With NDI's help, the committee developed a set of community priority issues that were communicated to the mayor's office. Committee members also established mini-city halls in their respective districts and began holding regular office hours.

From July 26 to August 3, NDI Program Officer Gabriel Hütter and Ambassador Nelson Ledsky, NDI Senior Associate and Program Manager for Eurasia, visited Lithuania to assess the progress of NDI's program. During their visit, they met with the U.S. Ambassador, USAID staff in Vilnius, local government officials in Kaunas and Alytus, the director of the Municipal Training Center at Kaunas Technological University, and the vice dean of KTU's school of public administration. The assessment concluded that while much progress had been made in Kaunas, the process of extending the program to Alytus, Utena, and Ukmerge needed to be accelerated.

In the second half of 1996, NDI focused on expanding its activities to Alytus, Utena, and Ukmerge. A series of meetings in July confirmed that local officials in each of these cities were interested in using the Kaunas model of setting up a citizens' advisory committee. In Utena and Ukmerge, the basis for such a committee was already in place through existing neighborhood representatives appointed by the mayor. In Alytus, the mayor requested NDI's help with organizing a series of neighborhood meetings on community priorities.

NDI returned to all three cities in August and September 1996 to conduct a series of

training sessions. In Alytus and Utena, Levinson presented an introductory seminar on citizen participation for members of the city council and administrative staff. He also held a training session for staff members of the Alytus public information department on organizing public hearings. In addition, he began teaching a graduate-level lecture course on citizen participation in cooperation with Dr. Jolanta Paliduskaite, an assistant professor at KTU. As part of the teaching materials for the course, Levinson began work on a citizen participation handbook for local officials.

Throughout the fall of 1996, Levinson continued to assist the public information department in Kaunas with its citizens' advisory committee. In Alytus, Levinson worked with the mayor's office to designate nine neighborhoods in which meetings on community priorities would be held and recommend ways to include NGO representatives and business leaders in these meetings. In Ukmerge, NDI assisted in the establishment of a citizens' advisory committee and helped to organize and facilitate its first meeting. At NDI's suggestion, Ukmerge's mayor instituted a two- to three-hour weekly public meeting and made himself available to meet with citizens individually.

In January 1997, Levinson abruptly left NDI to join the staff of the USAID mission in Vilnius, causing NDI to suspend its program. In March, a three-person NDI team traveled to Lithuania to evaluate the program and make recommendations regarding its continuation. The team determined that NDI's work in the target cities was not complete. Based on the evaluation team's recommendations, NDI decided to continue the program in Kaunas, Alytus, and Ukmerge. NDI decided to discontinue its work in Utena, whose mayor had proven unreceptive to the idea of working with NDI. NDI also made plans to organize a seminar on citizen participation in local government for officials and NGO representatives from across Lithuania and to complete the handbook on citizen participation. NDI decided to continue its program in partnership with the MTC and to provide the MTC with a subgrant for this purpose. Under the partnership, the MTC began managing the daily operations of the program, with an NDI consultant traveling to Lithuania periodically to advise the MTC and participate in formal training activities.

Program activities resumed in June 1997 and continued through February 1998. During this period, NDI and the MTC re-established working relationships in Kaunas, Alytus, and Ukmerge and conducted training for local officials and NGO leaders, as described below. NDI and MTC staff worked throughout the fall on preparations for the citizen participation seminar and completing the handbook.

Kaunas

The citizens' advisory committee in Kaunas languished briefly with the break in NDI's programming and a change in the Kaunas administration. In June 1997, however, newly elected mayor Tamulis expressed interest in re-activating the committee and requested

assistance in establishing a system for processing citizens' complaints, suggestions, and inquiries.

During a visit in September, NDI Local Government Consultant Wallace Rogers and Mayor Tamulis discussed reforms to the Kaunas complaint and request-for-services systems, based on the model used in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. In October, the MTC presented a plan for processing complaints and requests to the mayor's chief advisors which was passed in part by the city council in March 1998. The MTC also conducted a goal-setting workshop for local council officials, senior administrative officials, and NGO representatives.

Alytus

Following an NDI training session in the fall of 1996, the Alytus city council adopted an ordinance allowing the mayor to set up citizens' committees to address specific community issues. At the request of Mayor Kurtinaitis, the MTC met with city government and city council members in June 1997 to discuss their roles in implementing that ordinance. Subsequent consultations in September focused on strategies to recruit citizens for citizen advisory committees. Wally Rogers presented information about community job banks and telephone campaigns. NDI and the MTC agreed to assist the mayor in organizing workshops to attract advisory board participants.

In October 1997, NDI and the MTC held two meetings in Alytus. The first was a meeting with elected and appointed local officials which focused on consensus decision-making and a discussion of Alytus' citizen participation ordinance. This session was followed by a meeting between Mayor Kurtinaitis and a group of community leaders to review and prioritize the most important issues facing the community. Mayor Kurtinaitis invited citizens to form committees that would study these issues and recommend solutions to the city government and pledged that the city government would be receptive to the committees' findings. Several committees were subsequently formed to lay the foundation for developing a strategic plan for the city.

Ukmerge

During NDI Consultant Wally Rogers' June 1997 visit to Ukmerge, Mayor Grusauskas expressed his desire to work with NDI and the MTC on reactivating a committee of community representatives. He also requested help in establishing a strategic planning task force.

Pursuant to these goals, the MTC conducted several workshops in Ukmerge during the summer. A planning session with municipal officials resulted in a preliminary list of problems and corresponding projects for the city to undertake during the next three years.

This list was presented to a meeting of community and civic leaders in September .

In cooperation with the MTC, the mayor's office has since called together several citizens' committees to research further problems in the community and advise the administration about possible solutions. The committees began meeting in the spring of 1998 with the goal of eventually drawing up a comprehensive strategic plan for the city.

Citizen Participation Seminar and Handbook

On November 20-21, 1997, NDI and MTC conducted a seminar on citizen participation in Birštonas. Fifty-eight senior local government officials (including 12 mayors and six vice-mayors) representing 24 municipalities, as well as 16 NGO representatives attended the seminar. Five American and Lithuanian experts made presentations at the opening and closing sessions and conducted the following workshops: 1) an overview of techniques and procedures for including citizens in local decision-making; 2) specific skills used by public officials when presenting themselves to and communicating with the public and the media; and 3) a discussion of citizen committees and public commissions that are permanent features of local government and actively help make decisions.

Citizen Participation Handbook

In October 1997, NDI completed *The Citizen Participation Handbook: A Practical Guide for Local Governments in Lithuania*. The handbook presents an argument for involving citizens in local government decision-making and an overview, drawing on examples from the United States and elsewhere, of techniques used by local governments to promote citizen participation. The handbook was translated into Lithuanian, and 500 copies were printed. Roughly 100 copies were distributed at the November seminar. The remaining copies were distributed to local governments, universities, NGOs, and government ministries. (An English-language copy of the handbook is included with this report.)

POST-USAID PROGRAMMING

NDI has continued its local government program in Lithuania with a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy. NDI sent a new field representative to Kaunas in August 1998 to continue program activities and advise the MTC. Program activities have encompassed the continuation of citizen participation initiatives in Kaunas, Alytus, and Ukmerge, and the expansion of the program into three additional cities: Šiauliai, Visaginas, and Jonava.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The primary aim of NDI's local government program in Lithuania was to establish in several cities procedures that would provide permanent opportunities for citizen participation. It was further hoped that these cities could serve as a model for other cities in Lithuania. While it did not succeed fully in realizing its aim during the period of this agreement, NDI's program was able to establish citizen participation initiatives in all three of the cities in which it concentrated its activities. As a result of NDI's work, the city of Kaunas has passed in part a plan to facilitate the handling of citizen complaints and requests for services. Alytus and Ukmerge have established citizen advisory committees on local issues that continue their work with the help of NDI and the MTC.

NDI's program did succeed in introducing concepts of citizen participation to a large audience of local officials and NGO representatives from across Lithuania. The success of NDI's November 1997 seminar is documented by the many requests for cooperation which NDI and the MTC received afterwards. Complementing the information provided at the seminar and the work in the target cities, NDI's citizen participation handbook provides a permanent resource for local officials and others throughout Lithuania.

Finally, NDI's partnership with the Municipal Training Center and participation in to the public administration program at Kaunas Technological Universities have contributed to the development and sustainability of an important training resource for local officials. Besides providing the MTC with direct financial assistance, NDI has assisted the MTC in diversifying its funding base, and in the last two years the MTC has successfully secured funding through such sources as the National Endowment for Democracy and the World Bank. As a result of their cooperation with NDI, both KTU and the MTC have incorporated citizen participation as a permanent feature of their programs and services, thus ensuring that the assistance provided by NDI continue beyond the Institute's presence in Lithuania.