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Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski

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Introducing The Moscow Center for Prison Reform

- 1 **PIPSS.ORG** - Could you briefly introduce yourself and explain the circumstances that led you to work for the Moscow Center for Prison Reform?
- 2 **Liudmila Alpern:** My name is Liudmila Alpern. I am the deputy director of the Moscow Center for Prison Reform¹. I have been working in this organization for 10 years, although I was connected to it for many more years prior to that. Founded by Valery Abramkin in 1988, the organization has existed for twenty years. Abramkin was jailed in 1979 for anti-Soviet propaganda. He was freed in 1985 (just prior to Gorbachev’s grant of amnesty to prisoners of conscience) and 3 years later founded this organisation.
- 3 I was one of his acquaintances from the 1970’s. I was a young student and part of a politically oriented circle surrounding Abramkin, who was at the time one of the editors of the samizdat journal *Poiski*. We were engaged in such underground activities as samizdat, forbidden songs, and illicit writings. In 1979, some of my friends were arrested and sent to prison. Valery was among them. I kept contact with them. I even wrote a letter in defence of Abramkin, which was very dangerous at that time. My correspondence with political prisoners was my first contact with the prison world. But at that time, at age 17, I also read Solzenitsyn’s book *The Gulag Archipelago* and it made a strong impression on me. I guess those are the reasons I work in a prison today: the imprisonment of old friends and my reading of this book.
- 4 When Abramkin was freed, I helped him on a voluntary basis for many years. He invited me to join the organization but I had to raise my son. It was only in 1998 that I started to work with Abramkin officially.
- 5 **PIPSS.ORG** -How many people work for the organization? How many on a permanent basis and how many part-time?
- 6 **Liudmila Alpern:** We have 10 permanent positions here, our Council has six members, and we have several divisions. We have known each other for a long time; since the mid-1970’s. We have no strict hierarchy. The organization is horizontal rather than vertical. This allows each of us to do what he feels like doing. Somehow there used to be a vertical one but there is not any more.
- 7 **PIPSS.ORG** -What are your areas of interests in the spheres related to Power Ministries?
- 8 **Liudmila Alpern:** We work with state prisons in different regions, for example, prisons for women and for young girls. Since 1998, prisons have been under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. We also work on a project concerning torture.
- 9 **PIPSS.ORG** -Are there any differences between prison for women and prison for men? Do you deal with men as well?
- 10 **Liudmila Alpern:** There are two different hierarchies. For the men it has a more military-like structure. The women, in contrast, are very obedient. We actually don’t deal with men directly, but only through the letters they send us. We receive about 3 000 letters from male prisoners each year.

Empirical analysis of the Center for Prison Reform's work

11 **PIPSS.ORG** -What are your programmes or activities involving prisons and when were they implemented?

12 **Liudmila Alpern:** We started to work in 1998 when Russia joined the Council of Europe and the prisons started to open up. We were the first to enter the prisons. And the first thing we brought them was humanitarian help, because there was nothing there. Later, the French organization based in Lyon, L'Observatoire International des Prisons², sent me a questionnaire with 300 questions on the observance of women's rights in prisons. I was astonished and I understood that I was unable to answer. The only source of knowledge about prison was Abramkin who had himself been jailed, but he could only provide answers from a man's point of view. This pushed me forward and I was able to obtain the authorization from GUIN³ of the MVD⁴, which was at that time in charge of prisons, to conduct research in six institutions: 3 women's colonies (The Mardovskaya, Orlovskaya and Vladimirskaia colonies) and 3 SIZOs⁵ (Moscow SIZO n°6, Briansk and Pskov). I was able to have brochures printed up as questionnaires (closed but also opened questions) and to give them not only to prisoners and also to the staff members. We received more than 300 answers. Not only did we distribute the questionnaires, we also were able to speak with female prisoners and members of the staff. I gained important, rich material, and thanks to it I acquired a deep knowledge of this field.

13 **PIPSS.ORG** -What was your assessment of the situation?

14 **Liudmila Alpern:** We were shocked by the conditions they lived in: medical neglect, no decent food, no clothing, no sanitary supplies essential for feminine hygiene, no storage for their belongings, and lack of legal protection...

15 Two colonies had children's homes (Mardovskaya n° 2 and Vladimirskaia). And we were amazed to see that the children lived separated from their mothers. That is, the mothers having very limited access to their children. We were the first to see those living conditions. At that time, I had very dark thoughts about the prison administration which I thought was fascist and intentionally upsetting the poor prisoners. I had read books that played on such stereotypes. It was the view of an outsider. My opinions were changed, thanks to one of the colony where we were received voluntarily with great consideration - and where it was certainly risky for them to do that. It was there we started a dialogue that has lasted already 10 years. And from that moment, my opinion changed completely about everything.

16 **PIPSS.ORG** -What program are you working on today?

17 **Liudmila Alpern:** I am working on a new project: a program aimed at introducing mediation between convicts and staff personnel of women's colonies. We have been providing this kind of training for already four years. It is called "mediation service" and is conceived as an alternative to disciplinary measures. We consider it as a way to modernize the system, especially the staff mentality. In four years almost 300 persons (staff) benefited from this program. We already see that relations have changed between staff members and convicts. It allows them to find a common language in which they can talk with one another. The convicts are able to speak about their problems to the staff. They learn to speak without hurting each others' feelings.

"Criticizing does not bring you anywhere"

18 **PIPSS.ORG** -Who were your partners in the implementation of the program?

19 **Liudmila Alpern:** We were able to implement this program thanks to the support of the French association Caritas and her representative Anouck Coqblin, who was our coordinator. With her help and Caritas financial support, we were able to bring to France prison directors, where they visited and critiqued French prisons. But back home, there was a big step taken when one of the directors demolished its solitary confinement cell and reconstructed it in a more humane way. In our country you should know that solitary confinement cell can be compared

- to torture: there is a very small window in there, no chair, very often no bed⁶ is supplied. Women are undressed, in winter they are usually not provided with warm clothes, and so on.
- 20 What I understood and what has become a work criterion is that if you don't like these people, if you only see what is bad, nothing will come out of it. You'd better do something else. To be able to have an interaction you have to listen to each other and then things can begin to change.
- 21 **PIPSS.ORG** -Who performs the training? Do you work with local partners?
- 22 **Liudmila Alpern:** We invited specialists to train the staff and convicted women. In Russia there is an organization the Center for Penal Reform⁷. For already several years they have been engaged in mediation training. In 2004 they started to work for us.
- 23 You have to understand that this is part of the same program, the long term project that began in 1998. We first brought humanitarian help, then psychologists, legal experts (lawyers), then with the collaboration of the administration we created an "initiative group" in which included representatives of all departments (otdel) and detachments (otriad) of the prisons. We created a joint group of convicts and employees with which we started to work and among others discuss safe sexual life, healthy way of living, and the need for a medical care center. Each participant was supposed to tell the rest of his colleagues or co-convicted what happened in this group, to circulate the information. When we understood that this program was working, we started to organize a wider project involving more personnel and convicts. The preliminary training concerned 100 persons (50 convicts and 50 staff members). But this is less than 10%. A colony is comprised of 1,500 convicts and 300 female staff members. So 50 mediators it is not that bad.
- 24 I can't say that the program went as smoothly as we thought. It was much more difficult than what we expected. There were a lot of obstacles but nevertheless we succeeded in fulfilling it. I can't say this is the exact project we originally planned for. In fact, we changed it several times, transforming, adapting, and adjusting it.

Impact of the program

- 25 **PIPSS.ORG** -In concrete terms, what has this program changed in convict-staff relations?
- 26 **Liudmila Alpern:** There is a colony where the spirit of mediation really exists. It is noticeable through the personnel behaviour. They have changed, they are different. They are more opened. But at first they were not bad persons either. But today it is another level, there is this characteristic that appears with mediation: the fact that one listens to the other. There are mediators who can actively interfere in case of any kind of violation.

Access to power ministries

- 27 **PIPSS.ORG** -At what levels of the administrative hierarchy do you have ties?
- 28 **Liudmila Alpern:** We have contacts with directors of several departments of the Central Prison Administration, but this time we are not in relation with the director of FSIN⁸ (Federal Service for the Execution of Punishments).
- 29 The personal factor is very important for us. In the regional (Orel) level we have a contact with all levels of the Prison Administration though there are some concrete persons we communicate with more often and quite productively. For example, we regularly interact with the director of the Department of Education of the Orel's Prison Administration (Nachalnik Vospitatel'nogo otdela Upravlienii). There is no obligation for her to do that. She probably has personal ambitions.
- 30 On the Federal level we have ties with Ella Pamfilova, Chairman of the Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights Council under the President of the Russian Federation. So it is at a high level. Radio Rossii has been running our program for many years. We have no relation to the ministry of Justice, because this ministry now has no real power in prisons.

Evaluating the autonomy of regional actors

- 31 **PIPSS.ORG** -From your experience, what can you say about the autonomy of regional actors?
- 32 **Liudmila Alpern:** I have a very positive work experience with them. I see that people in their sphere of power do everything they can. They are sympathetic to this work and they welcome it. Concerning the work we do together, they say, "it is our tradition". It is part of them already. They do not see how they can do without it and at their own level, they support our action. But when they need their superior's help, they have great difficulties to obtain it.
- 33 For instance the "service of mediation" we founded is not yet formal, although we signed some common documents to legalize its activities in order for it to start functioning. But in order to institutionalize it, we would need to get funding to pay for the coordinators' salaries. But this we can't get. The regional administration can not do that because they are told from above that it is not possible. They have a limited autonomy because they are a federal department.
- 34 But there can be surprises, as in March 2008 when Anouck Coqblin came to visit the project as the coordinator. She knows the prison directors and they have had very warm relations since she accompanied them to France. But it was very difficult to get an authorization to let her visit the prisons. This kind of authorization for foreigners is only given in Moscow. Russians can get it in the regions but foreigners have to get it in Moscow. So the authorization was requested by the regional administration of the prison itself and after a month they could not get anything. As far as we were concerned, we could not ask for it because we had very bad relations with the central administration, we were on trial. So the regional administration of the prison decided to assume the responsibility for it. Of course, after doing so that they received a response from the Prison Administration. But I consider the fact that the regional administration took on itself the responsibility to invite her to have been a major break-through!

The organization's relations to institutions of power

- 35 **PIPSS.ORG** -How would you assess the state attempts to put in place institutionalized forms of cooperation with power ministries, with the creation of social platforms, the Public Chamber (OP) or the reactivation of pro-governmental associations (GONGOs). Also, what relations do you have with them?
- 36 **Liudmila Alpern:** None of this is out of the ordinary. We are used to such attempts. We relate to each of them differently. There is one organization which represents in the Public Chamber all the organizations working with prisons – I do not remember exactly its name – it collaborates successfully with Kalinin. I have known the leader of this organization for many years. She is working on women's prison like me. I took part of some kind of event with her. In principle I could work with her though her activity is not my taste, her organisation is a kind of GONGO.
- 37 When some kind of incident occurs, she is chosen as a public voice. For instance there was a mutiny in Chelyabinsk last summer and four convicts were killed, they called her and she commented these events as a representative of NGOs. And obviously she justified this kind of phenomenon. Whatever is unbearable for us becomes quite normal for her.
- 38 **PIPSS.ORG** -Would you evaluate the revival of the GONGOs as a modernizing factor of former Soviet inherited institutional practices?
- 39 **Liudmila Alpern:** What modernization? It is rather archaic form of the system. It is a characteristic phenomenon of the Soviet system.
- 40 Let me explain to you what we consider to be GONGOs: for instance at the UN Conference on human rights last year, it was interesting to see the list of participants. At the conference were the Rerikh Fund (named after a painter who lived in India), the Pan-Russian Society "Znanie", The Union of Economists, The All-Russian Congress of Russian People (the center of its activities is in Danilovski monastery) etc. These organizations have their own spheres of activities and they probably do a lot in their field but on the human rights' side they have

no real involvement. And in these sense they can be viewed as GONGOs. For human rights organization they are GONGOs.

41 **PIPSS.ORG** -Why aren't you member of the Public Chamber?

42 **Liudmila Alpern:** I don't even remember why we are not member of the Public Chamber. Whether they did not take us or we did not want to go there. There was a time when it was shameful to go because it was seen as collaboration. Now it is different. It seems that there is a real process going on there. But I find it difficult to evaluate it. I tried to call them for a question related to my work – a convict which was in a difficult situation, without passport, paralysed, and living with a man who beats her – I called the social service of her region so they checked on her but if she has no passport they don't want to do anything. Then I tried to call the Public Chamber. It was very difficult to reach them. The only information they gave me is that she must acquire a passport. That's all. I am not very familiar with their work. Although one of our neighbours, a well-known human right activist from the Soviet time, Boris Altshuller who deals with children's rights, works there as an expert and he seems to do something there. It probably also makes sense.

43 **PIPSS.ORG** -Have you suffered from the April 2006 law⁹ since it went into force or are your relations with the civil servants you frequent protecting you from any harassment?

44 **Liudmila Alpern:** We were on trial; attempts to kick us out of the building were made,even if Abramkin is a member of the Commission under the president. In the regions, it is much more difficult. I am talking about organizations which work like us. In Irkutsk for instance, people who work like us are growing pessimistic.

« Activist drain » towards governmental structures

45 **PIPSS.ORG** -How difficult is it to work in your sector?

46 **Liudmila Alpern:** Working in our sector, through contact, network, working with the governmental sector is asking for a large volume of energy. We value our sector, and we support wherever it is possible. But sometimes it is more difficult to work in this sector than in the governmental sector which is more stable, understandable. And here sometimes we happen to make such amazing encounters that we don't know how we are going to work with them. The colleagues from Irkutsk I mentioned, for instance, for the last years, they have been complaining about their life. They say that in 2000 when they started their project, they thought they would get grants that they would move forward and now it is clear that it is not the case. These people are young – younger than us – in their thirties. And we are retired or almost retired, so are the members of the Center for Human Rights who are in the same building. And they have children; they need to have incomes, to have a future. So they look for jobs in the government sector, in the business sector. They are beginning to leave non governmental association to join governmental ones.

Funding: to take governmental funding or not to take...

47 **PIPSS.ORG** -Who is financing your projects?

48 **Liudmila Alpern:** The Soros Foundation has always supported us. So has Caritas, as well as Acer-Russie- a French organization of Russian immigrants living in Paris. The British organization Every Child has been financing our project on female juvenile detention facilities, along with the American consulate. I personally received a grant from the Mc Arthur Foundation and IREX that enabled me to work in New York for a half of year and to visit state prisons. We used to get financing from the Switzerland and the Dutch Consulates and the Ford Foundation, but we don't any more. Basically funding is decreasing.

49 **PIPSS.ORG** -Have you applied for a governmental tender so far?

50 **Liudmila Alpern:** This year, for the first time, we participated in a tender launched by the State Russian Foundation. We don't know yet if we will be selected. We will probably know it within six months. But I don't know if it is a good thing to get those grants from the

Government or not. I'm afraid that it could be used as a tool against us by the government, - for instance as an opportunity to make financial controls. In the Volgograd region for instance, a similar association got a grant from the US government and a Russian grant. And they got trouble. This mechanism is frequently used against the private sector, so we stay vigilant!

Assessing the organization's impact on social change

51 **PIPSS.ORG** -How would you assess the organization's impact on social change?

52 **Liudmila Alpern:** I assess its impact as very high. I think that our organization, since its creation 20 years ago has tremendously influenced society because it is visible that our words our reports are literally borrowed by the presidential administration staff in their speeches.

53 What we have written or said 10 or 5 years ago is part of the common language now. What seemed at that time an insult is taken seriously today. Therefore we have strongly influenced the development of society. I think we have a very positive impact on it. In principle the persons who worked at the very beginning in this organization are still in the organization and believe in what they are doing.

54 As far as reforms are concerned, in the MVD today there are positive moves: not long ago at the occasion of the visit of the Commission for eradication of torture of the European Council, we were told that Center for temporary detention in Moscow for the last four years had seen the number of detainees decreasing by six and that conditions had improved. This kind of improvement occurred, although nothing similar was said with respect to SIZOs.

55 As far as the ministry of Justice is concerned, Iu. I. Kalinin, (the director of Federal Service for the Execution of Punishments) has definitely been a reformer. A lot has been done over the past fifteen years: the quality of food and general conditions improved. But now the reforms have slowed down. Since 2004, the number of prisoners has seriously increased. One man out of four in Russia today has been sent to jail. The average stay in prison is 7 years. Amnesties have been cancelled, but no law about rehabilitation has been passed. The number of women imprisoned has risen to 67 000. And Kalinin seems to think that things are going pretty well now. The ministry of Justice has certainly been the most reformed institution in Russia. But now this process has been slowed down. Perhaps because Justice had been in vanguard for a long time.

56 **PIPSS.ORG** -How do you think you are perceived by society?

57 **Liudmila Alpern:** We are perceived as a foreign, "western" element. Russian society does not see the need for us now. Still, we work for the future. Without us the future does not exist.

Notes

1 <http://www.prison.org./index.shtml>.

2 International Prison Watch [E.S.K.'s note].

3 The Russian prison administration [E.S.K.'s note].

4 The MVD was in charge of prison until 1998 when the ministry of Justice took over [E.S.K.'s note].

5 Investigation isolation wards [E.S.K.'s note].

6 There are no beds in SIZOs, only folding ones which look like shelves and are folded during the day and opened at night [Interviewee's note].

7 *Tsentr « Sudebno-pravovaia reforma »* [E.S.K.'s note].

8 *Federalnaia Sluzhba Ispolneniia Nakazanii* [E.S.K.'s note].

9 The April 2006 law imposed the re-registering of all existing Russian and international associations and the tightening of administrative controls [E.S.K.'s note].

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