

"United Way" Belarusian Republican Non-Governmental Organization

“Voluntary culture as leverage of cross-cultural activities in sparsely populated areas with an added value for democratic participation and community bonding”

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Working hypothesis

Being directly or indirectly engaged in the problem of small Belarusian villages since 1972, we would like to specify the districts a priori most suitable for the project (Fig. 1). On the light map (which demonstrates dynamics of night lighting, i.e. intensity of modern life of this country, such districts are enclosed with double red-green lines. That might have been the end of it, but we have to choose one of the three, and such choice must be justified.

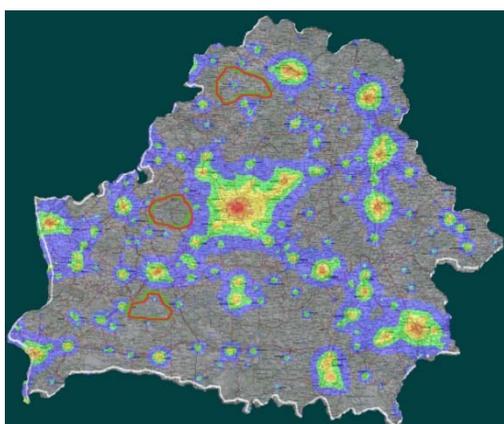


Figure 1. Territories of Belarus most suitable for the project ¹

1. Project aim and objectives

¹Limited technical capacity does not allow to transfer the shapes of territories intended for the project to other maps, though this would be reasonable as it clarifies and illustrates the entire analysis.

The project aim is to promote cross-cultural activities in the sparsely populated remote areas with an added value for civic and democratic participation and community bonding.

The project objective is to prevent from migration of small village inhabitants through providing them with the opportunities to develop folk crafts, involvement in cultural and training events, attraction of tourists.

2. Survey of the situation in the country:

2.1. *Structural changes*

With the development of mankind the rural areas undergoes changes almost similar for all countries. So, the number of workers concentrated in the places where lands are mostly fertile² (Fig.2), environmental conditions are most suitable, and communication lines are most reliable¹ (Fig.3) are on the decrease³. As a result, conditions are created spreading through a great number of villages, administrative districts, and even whole regions.

Response of the government to such decay processes does not comply with their safety and is mainly connected with formal interests of social protection and mobilization of all kinds of resources. Humanitarian problems are the last thing to be solved, mainly proportionately with people's initiatives.

It should be mentioned, that structural changes occur within the period which is less than the time of professional and social formation of one generation. In Belarus changes affected both the production pattern and social order, which made the problems inherited from BSSR more complicated.

So, we should have a brief overview of the state of infrastructure, production environment, education system, health protection, trade, communication, transport, and recreation, i.e. all that

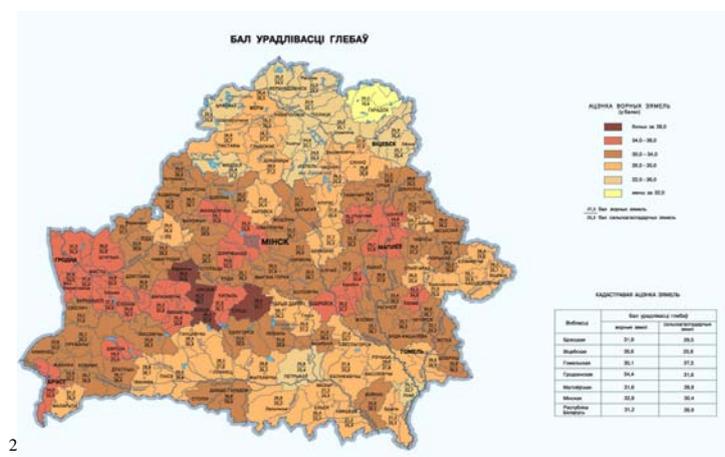
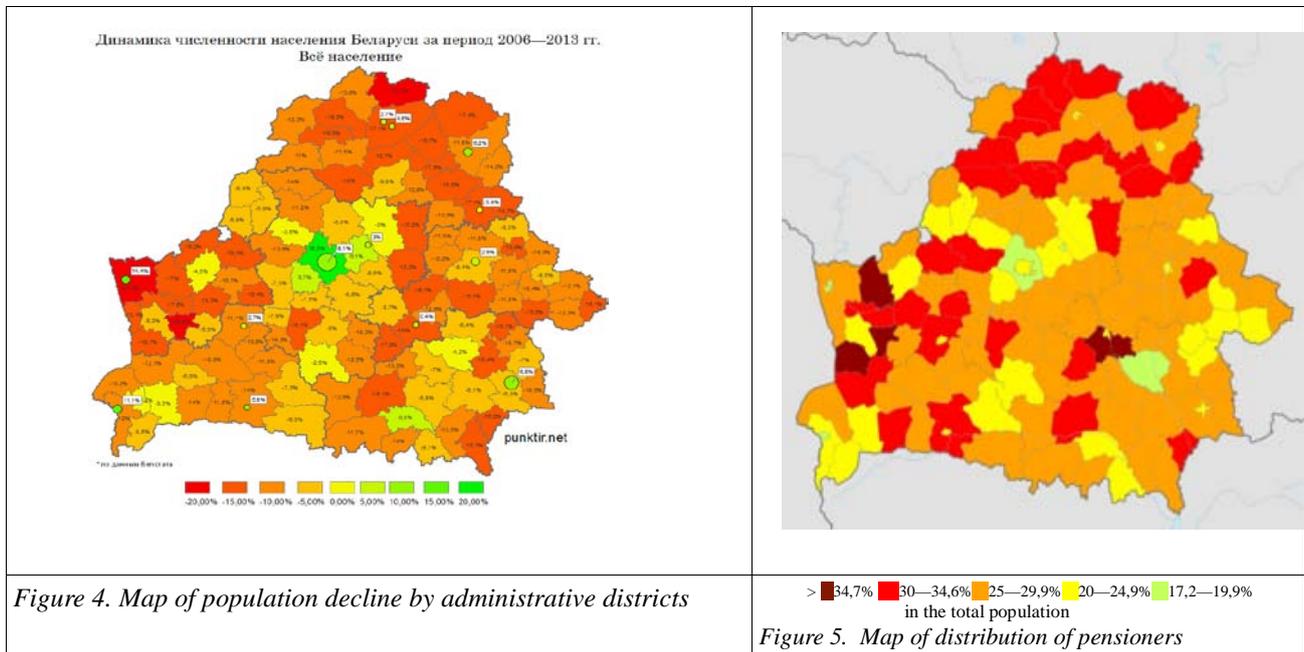


Figure 2. Map of lands fertility

³In 2000, as many as 14% of employed population were engaged in agriculture, in 2016 – 8%.

relates to mode of life and is connected with the settlement system in the regions located in relatively unfavourable conditions.



This review is based on identification of consequences caused by the present problems.

Structural changes occurring in Belarus after 1991 outstrip the transformation of settlement system which lags further and further behind the structures of production confronting the need for inevitable adjustment to intensification requirements.

2.1.1. Agrarian economy

Soviet production strategy of the government (considering that the number of family-operated farm in this country is less than 3000) remains unchanged, which fact negates the effectiveness of investments both in production and social infrastructures, due to growing inconsistency between complexity of instruments of labour and market relations, ability of the employed to use the same. This, on its turn, increases *the gap in the income level*⁴ and quality of life between rural and urban families, accelerates migration of young people to towns/cities.

Analysis shows that the main reasons of migration are economic ones (59%); every fifth countryman leaves his/her village by social reasons, every tenth – by reasons of structural nature. In the meantime, all-time president of this country A. Lukashenko persists with Stalin’s strategy of so called agro-towns constituting fruitless efforts of village urbanization, because correlation of capital of production and non-production spheres make 2:1 in the cities/towns, and 6:1 in villages, and such correlation has remained invariant for 50 years in spite of dozens of milliards of investments. I.e. the stronger is dependence of the development of village social sphere on funds allocated by agricultural enterprises, the more stable *disproportion between small and large rural settlements* will be.

At present, 100% of kindergartens, 100% of secondary schools, 97% of post-offices, 95% of

⁴E.g., in February 2016, wages/salaries of wage-and-salary workers in villages made 63% of the country’s average wage/salary (37% without regard to managers)

cultural institutions, 95% of medical personnel, 90% of consumer service providers, 85% of modern housing stock, 80% of permanent shops are located in agro-towns.

2.1.2. Demography

Against this background, *demographic cataclysm* which has started after completion of collectivization in Western Belarus, draws to a close. When analyzing it, we have to consider only the circumstances are relevant to our project.

So, *predominance of women in the population*, especially vivid in the elder age groups, is peculiar to the Belarusian village. The reason is early male mortality. The gap in the mean length of life of men and women in villages makes 17 years.

Decline in birth rate. Aggregate birth rate steadily declines during recent 50 years.

Negative migration balance from village to towns/cities and abroad has been retained at the level 70-90 thousand persons per year for 50 years.

Distorted employment pattern heavily shifted in favor of persons of older – retirement and preretirement – age. Modal age of people employed only in the field of production management declines.

Low level of education. The number of people with incomplete secondary education is the country's largest in villages.

2.1.3. Infrastructure

The problem would be not all bad, if it was not for *imperfect transport infrastructure*. One third of settlements have no regular transport communication with larger inhabited localities.

That is why the population structure and all types of agro-service and non-production activities related to carrying our works and services to the population are heavily displaced to agro-towns and centers of former collective farm' teams or state farm departments (table 1).

It looks as follows:

Table 1

Quantity and structure of the population depending of the type of settlement (%)

	<i>Agro-towns</i>	<i>Teams' centers</i>	<i>Small villages</i>
<i>population</i>	54	33	13
<i>children</i>	72	21	7
<i>capable to work</i>	76	21	3
<i>pensioners</i>	19	35	46

Distribution of small villages and their population in the territories looks as follows:

Table 2

Territorial distribution of small settlements and population of small villages (average in the country within average administrative district)

	<i>Distance from a district center, km</i>			
	<i>below 10</i>	<i>-20</i>	<i>-30</i>	<i>over 30</i>
<i>Population per 100 square km</i>	20	16	9	7
<i>Population per one settlement</i>	19	17	15	11

In this way, social and economic imbalance between the population of small remote villages and other countrymen is formed, maintained and strengthened. There are no economic grounds for existence of such villages within the state strategy of the of rural industry development in agrotowns and suppression of private initiative.

They also have no demographic prospects: it is empirically known that if the average age of the population in a settlement exceeds 45 and the type of economic activity carried on in such settlement changes, such settlement will disappear.

2.2. Cultural shifts

Culture as a phenomenon is composed of two parts: material body of culture (what has been created by the nation during its existence), and the language. Historical fate of Belarus was such that both parts of the national culture have been badly hit.

From the angle of purposes of this project, sufficient are the things which have stood the test of time and can be transformed to the forms able to support life in small villages: i.e. the language, institutes which ensure interaction and communication between people, and also experience in certain crafts.

2.2.1. A farmstead as a mode of life

It has to be said that in terms of adaptability for changing life environment the Belarusian peasants practically demonstrated everything but the kitchen sink. That is why, in spite of administrative efforts, the village preserves much unchangeable.

Let's take, for example, any Belarusian village which has survived after total devastation within the past century.

Most probably, it is populated by direct descents from enfranchised peasant serves; "Stolypins" peasant proprietors; farmers "liberated" by the Great October Socialist Revolution; collective farm members. At present all they are again wage-workers of agricultural enterprises. Free peasants or farmers can be met occasionally.

It is less favourable but fully possible that one or more families have lived in such village, in the same very old houses, from serfage time, changing their social status mainly on the orders of authorities.

Conservatism of architecture and technological structure of a farmstead are by no means distinguished with mental consequences of life in the open air, but rather with unbreakable bond of traditional households and personal plots of the Belarusians with the climate and landscape: the fact that the farmstead as a technological and social-cultural complex is a result of centuries-long adaptation of millions of families namely to our change of seasons and kinds of agricultural works, synthesis of technologies supporting the mode of living and the life of peasants' families, – and the optimal way of human adaptation to the environment.

That is why farmstead stability is close to that of climate and landscape. And that is why peasant serves, peasant proprietors, collective farm members and agricultural labourers of some sort of JV Spikelet JSC can live in the same house from century to century. That is why anyone, if taken to a rural backwater (which is unlikely though not impossible), will have to provide himself, as well as his wives and children, with a house of a certain design, certain household outbuildings, cultivable land, farm implements. Then and only then he will begin to live in easy street among plants and animals keeping in mind additional income streams in preparation for victory of natural forces over the unlucky landowner.

In restless praise of the farmstead we are in danger of running into a certain "Pochvennichestvo" (nativism) and come to praising sacral fire up by friction. No sense, as since 1991 this complex, balance with millenarian practice, has been exposed to changes.

We should only pay attention to the changes and their consequences occurred on our object: gas

infrastructure development, water supply, disappearance of full-fledged subsidiary personal plots, disappearance of repair and manufacture of goods, change of the mode of work-rest routine and work-rest mode.

2.2.1. *Language*

Material body of culture in its contracted form is stored in the language. It is the Belarusian language where traditional work, stable relationship types common and viable under conditions of Belarus are preserved.

In 1840 the Russian tsar prohibited the use of the Belarusian language in education, courts, and army. Higher education in some fields in the Belarusian language was possible in the period from 1920s to 1950s of the XX century.

Later, the Central Committee of the CPSU assigned this country a role of a leader within the party's policy of construction of "a new historical community – soviet people". Launched in 1960 violent Russification (actual ban on the language in courts, army, higher education and secondary special education, government and business document circulation) resulted in replacement of the live Belarusian language with the soviet pidgin. Consequently, the number of words used daily by an average Russian-speaking Belarusian is four times less than that of an average Russian.

The state purposefully annihilates the Belarusian language. There is not a single higher educational establishment, special secondary educational establishment where the language of instruction is Belarusian, even though dozens of thousands secondary school student pass their finals in the Belarusian language. The Russian language is the language of the army, law-enforcement structures, court system.

Declension of the language entailed strong mental and social changes. In defiance of such efforts, the language held on at the mundane level for a certain period.

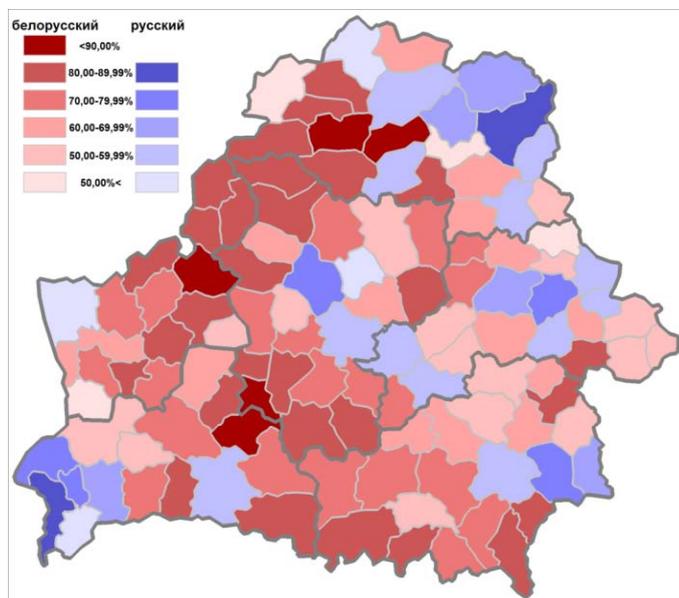


Figure 6. Map of use of the Belarusian language at the household level outside the city limits (Belarus National Census 2009 languages spoken at home share for rural population: Belarusian (red) and Russian (blue))

2.2.3. *National and cultural identity*

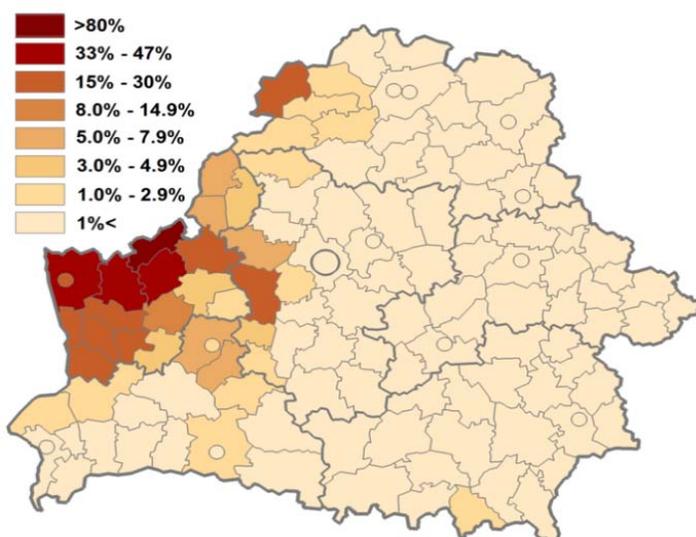


Figure 7. Map of distribution of ethnic Poles in Belarus

It would be a mistake to treat Belarus beyond the city limits as a monoethnic country. That is why we refer to the role which can be contributed to the project by the Polish minority, whose dramatic fate during communists' domination has substantially changed its position among the nations populating this country. One of the most educated and rich nations in 1940, it has passed into the poorest and least educated one by 1989. The things could probably move invertedly, but migration opportunities have become better, and it "preserves" the situation. The ethnic Poles born in the post-war years, who in their childhood lived primarily in small settlements and isolated farmsteads, have surprisingly better preserved the Belarusian language and skills of individual farming. Supported by Poland, this national minority is also the most consolidated one from among the Slavs and Christian minorities, which fact gives additional opportunities for cooperation.

2.2.4. *Religious identity*

Dissolution of the USSR and collapse of communist ideology entailed a strong process of strengthening religious life. This process cannot be construed as fully successful, as far as, e.g. from the part of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is grounded on the expressly anti-Belarusian idea of the "triunity of the Russian nation". At the same time, the Moslems and Catholics (Fig. 8) in the mentioned districts positively treat the Belarusian culture, are deeply integrated in the social medium, and historically had no conflicts with the orthodox population during one half of the century. Churches and Roman Catholic churches are the places where the inhabitants of small villages communicate with each other. The map shows that in spite of low density population in the mentioned districts, density of Catholic parishes is relatively high (Orthodox parishes exist everywhere, as 1000 churches of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church were built and restored in the past 25 years).

Рыма-каталіцтва
(колькасць парафій па раёнах)

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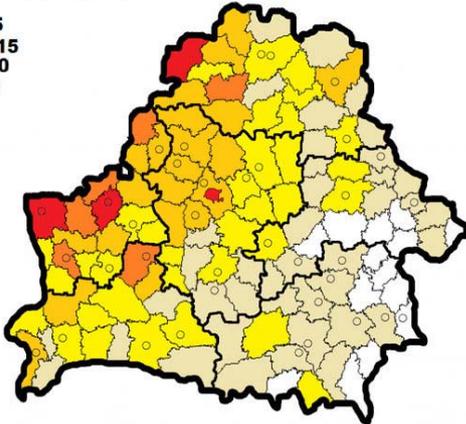


Figure 8. Map of density of Catholic parishes

3. *Criteria of choice of a region for the project implementations*

The purpose of this project here, in Belarus, is twofold. On the one hand, it is similar to that of hospice workers, i.e. to let small villages die peacefully and with dignity; on the other hand, to provide some of such village with the opportunity to survive through the change of business profile, if they succeed.

Our objects defined in the so to say working hypothesis, when looking at the light map compiled on the basis of satellite night light images, are located in the grey zone. It should be stressed that out of 9.5 million population as many as 7 million live in the areas coloured in red and orange, 2 million – in the regions coloured in green and blue. Density of population which is a target group of this project is 0,5 persons per square km.

Moreover, all three regions are located in the population decline area. On what particular regions should we focus? On those having more favourable natural, economic and other favourable conditions. Let's examine them one after another from north to south taking account not only of technological peculiarities and comparing the selected regions.

3.1. *Natural and climatic conditions*

After the disastrous explosion at the V.I.Lenin Chernobyl NPS one quarter of the Belarusian territory was contaminated with radionuclides and, truth be told, had to be removed from the area of economic activity. Alternatively, the country leader's strategy focuses on maximum drawing such localities into economic turnover. As a consequence, a great number of small sparsely inhabited villages are located within the contaminated area, but we believe that the appropriate projects may not be connected with support of natural population growth or population sustaining in such villages.

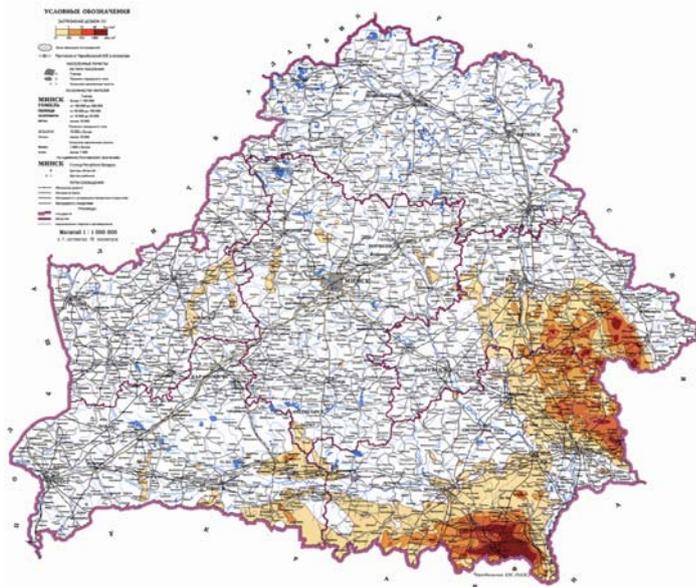


Figure 9. The map of territory contamination with radioactive cesium (is best congruent with the areas of contamination with other radioactive elements and areas where agricultural activity is inadvisable in the years ahead)

At the same time, the central (of the chosen) regions is partially located in the area of relatively low radioactive contamination, in the nearest proximity to the richest metropolitan region of this country. This requires clarification of information on on-site contamination with a view to eliminating certain kinds of activities there: agriculture and long-term recreation of visitors with children.

3.2. *Economic conditions*

Figure 10 shows that the north and central regions, located in the environment relatively unfavourable for agriculture, belong to the most economically depressive zones of this country. It causes differences between the welfare levels of the target group. The average amount of labour pension of the inhabitants of settlements covered by our sphere of interest makes 80% of the country's average amount, i.e. BYR 2,152,000 (approximately USD 100 per month); their nominal total salary due makes 2,600,000 or 39% of the country's average salary. In a number of north and north-east regions salaries are not paid or are paid irregularly. Moreover, the nominal total salary due makes the implicit level owing to the fact that we have accounted for small village inhabitants employed in forestry, transport, and industry.

Taking account of the average size of a family 1.9 persons and demographical structure of settlements, the average per capita income at disposal of a small remote village inhabitant is estimated as BYR 2.17 million, with the minimum consumer budget BYR 1.64 million. Due to such circumstances small village inhabitants first of all are evidently facing a problem of surviving.

It should be understood that any form of activity which fails to bring any income will not be treated with deference by the population. Moreover, inhabitants of the north region in its area belonging to tourist zone – Lake District (Poozerie) have certain shadow income from dwelling services and illegal fishery. Such circumstances will probably create new problems when dealing with the population.

The possibility to derive income from different kinds of activities is undoubtedly the main criterion of vitality of regions and settlements (fig. 10).

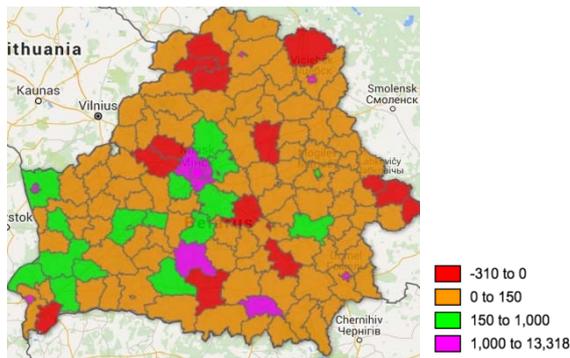


Figure 10. Map of net profit per districts (BYR milliard in January – September 2014)

Not unnaturally that inhabitants of the north region (which belongs to the most economically successful) will prefer agriculture, and small settlements in such region will be more and more involved in the process of economic transformation, and opportunities of this project implementation are relatively low there due to competition of other forms of activity.

The foregoing enables to come to the following conclusions:

- 1) it will be understood that any proposal not connected with deriving additional income will be opposed;
- 2) attempts to implement a certain initiative in remote small villages in east and north regions will fail by reason of extremely low paying capacity and poor transport accessibility for most of the year.

Thus we should focus on the villages located outside the main zone of radioactive contamination accessible to car owners with sufficiently high income level, residents of major cities.

In other words, such villages must be located in proximity to major cities, primary roads or objects of international tourism.

The regions marked on the map are suitable from the angle of economy and infrastructure.

3.3. Other conditions

The mentioned regions are notable for the fact that they are the remainder of the country's localities where more than one half of the population does not use the Russian language in everyday life (fig. 6).

The mentioned regions are the place of residence of both Belarusians and historical national minorities: the Poles (fig. 7) and Tartars who have preserved their national identity and faith of ancestors.

The north region is located in the border area between the “Braslav Lakes” National Park and Polotsk – Novopolotsk urban agglomeration where salaries/wages are higher than the country's average one due to the developed petrochemical industry. The region is a tourist destination attracting foreign visitors (primarily from Russia) and a great number of visitors from Minsk. At the same time, average salaries/wages in the mentioned territory are the country's lowest during the last five years. This region suits for our project perfectly, not accounting for negative attitude of KGB bodies to NGOs efforts to implement international projects in the border area.

The central region is a heart of Belarus. Its dialects served a basis for formation of the standard language. It has most completely captured the vestiges of material culture, confessional and national diversities. The major historical accomplishment and life histories of well-known persons are connected with this region. Minsk agglomeration sucks out its all resources. However farming is relatively profitable, the appreciable quantity of summer houses are located there, relative high transport accessibility enables young people to visit their elderly relatives more often than in other regions of Belarus.

The Ivenets Museum of Traditional Culture, Museums of Local Lore in Molodechno and Volozhin, “The Yanushkevichs” gallery-museum in Rakov, “Zaslavye” historical and cultural museum

preserve, Folklore Center in Rakov function there. The local rural communities are among the few presented in the Internet good enough, e.g. http://ivenec.eu/index/ivenec_zaprashae_gascej/0-11; <http://www.nalibaki.org/2016/04/blog-post.html>.

The natural complexes of Nalibokskaya Pushcha and its outskirts create the opportunity for renaissance of a number of traditional crafts.

Strong Polish and Rome-Catholic communities, including those tied with associations of fellow-countrymen throughout the world, will contribute to effective communication of the project participants.

The south region is the most preserved one from the ethnic and cultural angle. It has preserved its authenticity but lacks market outlets for its, so to say, cultural product, even though agrarian sector of economy – both state-owned and private – functions relatively effectively. At the same time, proximity of Soligorsk with its country's highest salaries/wages, and Moscow-Berlin highway give ground to hope for certain success with relatively high (as compared to the preceding regions) expenses in case of commitment to farming operation using environment-friendly and traditional technologies, provided the participants' income level is maintained or increased.

Taking account of the above comparison, the central region is the most promising.

4. Target group

All types of costs in all selected regions will be connected mainly with imparting to the survived small village population skills lost way back when by their parents.

To achieve a result, one will need not only living bearers of such skills located anywhere in this country to which it will be necessary to bring the project participants, but also re-constructors, scientists and museum workers.

Let's consider the situation in the target group using the example of the central regionⁱⁱ. The territories which are subordinate to Rakov and Ivenets rural councils (Volozhin district) are most suitable for dealing with. According to UN⁵ projects such territories should be made exemplary for ecotourism and local governance.

4.1. Gender-age and education structure

In the territory of Ivenets rural council there are as many as 1427 farmsteads with 3461 persons or 2.4 persons per a farmstead which is higher than the average national value. Nevertheless, the fact comes under notice that 0.55 children fall on the couple capable to work. Kamen', Sivitsa, Sudniki, Radniki, Doudka, Prouzhaly, Padnevichy, Galimtsy, Pralniki are the largest villages, the remaining 60 are small. All socialist infrastructure is situated in larger villages, small ones are connected with the rest of the world by travelling shops.

Population of Ivenets district by age		
younger than employable	employable	older than employable
523	1890	1051

The same situation is in Rakov rural council: total population makes 5273 persons, including 2592 in Rakov borough (or 49%). Of them: 2863 able to work, 1382 pensioners, 1028 children, as many families residing at Rakov are employed in Minsk. There are 2124 farmsteads in the mentioned rural council. There exist 64 villages, in 22 of them the population is less than 10 persons, in 13 – up to 20 persons, in 12 – up to 50 persons. I.e. 600 persons inhabit 47 villages.

Consequently, the target group in two rural councils makes approximately 1500 persons inhabiting

⁵ <http://un.by/by/undp/news/belarus/2011/03-11-2011-n2.html>

90 populated localities deprived of any social infrastructure.

4.2. Social degradation level and readiness to actions

Common availability of education, in particular benefits for servicepersons when entering higher and secondary special educational establishments, the so called “organized enrollment”, delivery of local youth to the ‘national economy’s construction projects” outside Belarus (which average quota in the period from 1955 to 1975 made 60 000 persons per region) and impossibility to develop farming drastically lowered cultural and mental levels of villagers, as almost all more or less brainy people were drawn from villages.

Among those who stayed, the process of the best people migration towards the best places of application of labour, i.e. large villages, started.

At the same time, average age of small village inhabitants, their alcoholization, share of people already convicted in their population, and – the main against such background – social dependency and dependence on local administrators and management of agricultural enterprises were growing.

The so-called “loud-hailer” – the wired-radio outlet, TV receiving 1-2 state channels, and a district newspaper were the external sources of informing and formation of such people.

The household studies in Belynichy district as early as the end of the 80s showed that 20% of small village inhabitants at the age over 40 were practically illiterate, i.e. forgot all they had studied at school. Over the last years, the situation has aggravated.

Such circumstances, and some other factors must be taken into account during implementation of such kind of projects⁶.

In brief, anyone who will try to implement such project will face minimum readiness of a target group to individual actions and complete unpreparedness for collective ones. It should be expressly indicated, that after managerial opposition to any kinds of penetration to local life from outside, this factor will be the main hindrance.

5. Prospective and desirable project participants

Social-economic evaluation of the project prerequisites gives ground to speak about formation – on the principles of local governance – of initiative groups which, if supported externally, can implement some small programs, in particular:

1. Zastsenak (Chamber) – one authentic peasant household of the beginning of the past century (restored by efforts of a small village), conduct of excursions, sale of products, demonstration and training in traditional skills and technologies.
2. Zelki (Plants) – the program of environmentally conscious collecting, treatment of wild plants and mushrooms, study of use of plants and mushrooms in the traditional cuisine and medicine. Reconstruction of functioning of ancient hospitals (without the right of medical practice).
3. The Year of the Belarusian – a program of phenological observations, traditional fests and rites, study of weather signs and weather forecasting.
4. Beegarden – demonstration of traditional bee-keeping, sale of wrapped cut-comb honey.
5. Roots – stories about villages, families and persons as a subject of interaction between local people and visitants. Telling stories in a clean house at supper, with video and audio recording, invitation of elderly persons from other sites. But this will be top performance.

The conception is that small village inhabitants will be the performers of all programs, tourists from Belarus and abroad will be the users. All those who become interested will be advisers and assistants.

Without doubt, successful implementation of this project requires participation of representatives of

⁶ E.g., it was so interesting in France:

La mémoire longue : temps et histoires au village, Nouvelles éditions JMP, Paris, 2000. Françoise Zonabend;

Une campagne voisine Minot, un village bourguignon, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1990 Collectif

the local government, workers of museums, owners of tourist companies, voluntary organizations of beekeeper, representatives of local religious communities, specialists in traditional crafts, owners of web-sites dedicated to localities covered by the project activities.

It is possible to compile the list of the project associates, but it will be valid only after agreement.

6. Conditions and prospects of the project implementation

The tasks of the project are the same as on the framework text. So we must focus on assessment of probable obstacles. The most characteristic for Belarus is administrative shift of the project-related agreements from the level of rural administrations (rural councils) to the level of districts, ministries, etc.

In this respect we see it fit to have a prior agreement on involvement of performers of national cultural and commercial programs coordinated with the government.

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<http://volozhin.gov.by/ru/god-kult>

The list can be easily extended during the project implementation.

Optimal possible results:

1. Implementation of one of the programs;
2. Creation of prerequisites for the development or transformation of other programs.

ⁱPlease note, that this map can be exposed to high magnification, so it is completely suitable for practical use within the project.

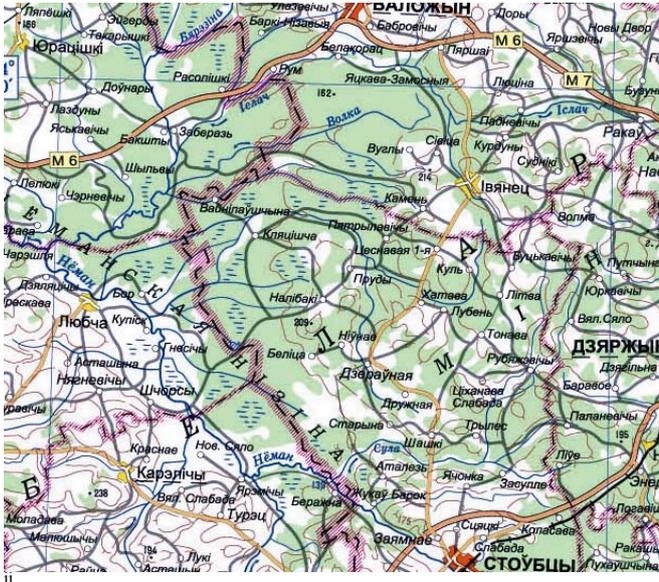


Figure 11. Map of the object