GIJTR
Global Initiative for Justice,
Truth & Reconciliation

IDFI
Institute for Development
of Freedom of Information

SUPPORTING CSOS IN DIGITAL ARCHIVING:

Practices of CSOs in the Former Soviet
States: Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

Digital archiving is crucial to the work of civil society organizations (CSOs), as it helps them document past and ongoing human rights violations and better utilize information to support transitional justice mechanisms and community-based truth, justice, and memory initiatives. However, many organizations with the potential to create and sustain significant digital archives are unable to do so. Due to a lack of capacity and resources, CSOs may be unable to effectively archive, store, and share their documentation, resulting in a risk that this valuable information could be lost or simply rendered ineffective in pursuing larger goals related to truth-telling, accountability, and remembrance.

With the above-mentioned context, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) completed a questionnaire with two other regional organizations for the research planned by the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR). The mentioned organizations represent the following states: Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine. These countries are linked by a common Soviet past of about 70 years, although since the 1990s their democratic transitions have been developing somewhat differently: while the democratization process has been rather advanced in Ukraine and Georgia, it has not, for the most part, even begun in Belarus, and the country is in fact still ruled by a Soviet-era leader, Alexander Lukashenko.[1]

There is also differences in the general openness of the archives throughout these countries. In 2017, with the financial support of the Open Society Institute – Budapest Foundation (OSI), the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), together with an international network of experts, started carrying out the project "Enhancing Openness of State Archives in the Former Soviet Republics". The project was aimed at assessing the archives of former Soviet and Eastern Bloc countries and enhancing their accessibility through relevant recommendations and advocacy campaign. Within the framework of the 2017-2018 project, a methodology[2] for evaluating the openness of state archives and the International Rating of Archives were created and 20 state archives in 10 post-Soviet countries were evaluated. The project continued during the next years (2019-2020), and 8 new countries from eastern and central Europe were added to the rating. As a result of the project, 36 archives of 18 countries were evaluated in total.[3]

According to the study - The Openness of State Archives in the Former Soviet Republics and Eastern Bloc Countries, Ukraine ranked 4th with 80.8% openness, Georgia - 7th with 70.99% openness, and Belarus took the third place from the bottom, being 16th with 42.17% openness. The possibility to obtain digital copies of documents from the archives of these countries also varied: according to the study, photocopying in reading halls of the State Archives was allowed only in Ukraine. Consequently, collecting copies of archival documents by CSOs is much easier in Ukraine than it is in Georgia or in Belarus.

This study is important in the region, as the digital storage of documentation, in addition to its practical purpose – that it meets modern standards - has other advantages as well. Continuing digital recordkeeping is particularly important in cases where repression and political persecution are still taking place in the country. This has been the case for Belarus – according to the evaluator, number of Belarusian human rights organizations were threatened with searches and confiscation of documents, which made it much easier and safer to store data digitally.

EVALUATING ORGANIZATIONS, THEIR EXPERIENCES AND THE NUMBER OF ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTATION PRESERVED

In Georgia, IDFI was evaluated for the purposes of this study. IDFI has years experience in collecting, analyzing, and publishing archival documents. IDFI created several databases, mostly related to the Soviet past, violation of human rights by the Soviet government, and subsequent eventscovering years 1920 through 1993: approximately – 2,500 scanned copies of documents from the MIA and the National Archives. 20 boxes of archival documents, approximately 200-250 documents in each of them. Documents created by the organizational activities – correspondence surveys, policy documents, articles, and other materials – amounted to approximately 12,000 digital documents.

In Ukraine, the Center for the Study of the Liberation Movement (CSLM) was assessed. The organization collects information on human rights violations under the communist political regime in Ukraine during the years of 1917–1991. As of April 2021, Digital Archive of CSLM stores 26.5 thousand documents.

In Belarus, a CSO[4] that collects documentation on the cases of the Soviet and modern period human rights violations, international humanitarian law, and national legislation of Belarus, as well as other types of information of a historical interest, was evaluated. The organization stores about 870 cases and approximately 40.000 pages of documents regarding only the modern-time repressions.

Consequently, while IDFI and CSLM are mainly focused on studying and analyzing the Soviet era, the Belarusian organization also collects cases of up-to-date human rights abuses.

KEY FINDINGS AND THE TRENDS IDENTIFIED IN ALL THREE COUNTRIES

Primary Focus and Objectives of Documentation

The shared goals for collecting and publishing the documents across the organizations are as follows: assistance in the restoration of social and historical justice; assistance to the repressed citizens in the reversal of unjustified and repressive acts of the State power; and assistance in their subsequent rehabilitation through the platform of Digital Archive, contribution to open access to the documents that contain information about the massive human rights violations.

An additional goal in Ukraine and Georgia is to help its states in the de-communication process of societies, which is still a challenge. In these countries, this process mostly relates to issue of detaching from modern Russia's orbit of influence and overcoming Russian propaganda, which is high on the agenda of these states. Russia is actively

using history for its own propaganda purposes. One of the main methods of combating this is archival openness and publication of articles based on document scrutiny. De-communization is one of the main goals of the Belarusian organization too. However, the Belarusian government does not declare this or detachment from the Russian influence a priority. On the contrary, the narrative - "I stopped de-communization" – is often proudly used by the current dictator of Belarus.[5]

The following are the methods of collecting documents deployed by the organizations: conducting relevant research in archives; creating and storing new documents; conducting interviews. IDFI has been cooperating with the National Parliament Library of Georgia and the MIA Archives for many years now. Within the scope of the international project – Stalin's Lists of Georgia, IDFI received documents from the MIA Archive for free. IDFI produces its primary documents in accordance with the internal numbering and storage rules established in the organization. All important documents: correspondence, research, reports and other materials created in the organization are preserved on a protected server as well as in physical form. As for CSLM, it digitizes documents from different archival institutions (primarily located in Ukraine) through partnership agreements. Furthermore, they digitize documents from the Center's archive about the Ukrainian liberation movement and repressions against it. Since the format of the Belarusian organization is different and the organization collects documents mainly reflecting modern repressions, the CSO collects documents in other ways: by photographing protests, creating a collection of protest propaganda products, conducting interviews, etc.

The organizations share the idea that archival documents should be available for everyone, including those of specific transitional justice or justice mechanisms: IDFI shares all its documentation publicly via its online sources. In this milieu, in 2018, the organization wrote articles for the project of the Policy Studies Institute CEVRO – Memory of Nations: Democratic Transition Guide about the "Regime Archives", "Lustration" and "Rehabilitation of Political Victims" during the transition period in Georgia.[6]

Documents of CSLM are accessible for everyone on the platform of Digital Archive (www.avr.org.ua) free of charge. CSLM is also a member of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience, which runs the Programme Justice 2.0 (Project International Justice for Communist Crimes).

 In Belarus, the transition period has not yet been achieved. As mentioned in the questionnaire: "Belarus does not yet have a transition period: apart from the transition from a single repression to a massive total legal outrage." The organization certainly shares the idea that transitional justice documents should be public and intends to actively use its own archives for this purpose in the future.

Documentation Storage

The problems that organizations face in the process of collecting documents vary - in some cases, they change over time, while in others they remain the same. In Ukraine such challenges have transformed over time - for example, the issue of accessibility of information - CSLM has launched a project in 2013 when Soviet archives were hardly accessible. Following the adoption of a relevant Law in Ukraine in 2015, the organization received a lot more opportunities for digitizing all the documents they were interested in.

In the case of Georgia, the main problem is related to the high costs of copying the documents from Georgia's state archives. In addition, the current law on "Personal Data Protection in Georgia" allows state archives not to disclose documents created less than 75 years ago for the proclaimed reasons of data protection, despite high public interest in them. Such a problem was not found in Ukraine. These two issues in the Georgian context have been resolved to a degree since IDFI launched its projects mentioned elsewhere in this report.

In Belarus, the CSO finds it difficult to find documents on contemporary repression - both victims and partner organizations are reluctant to share them. In this case, there is also a possibility for the following challenges to arise: threats of searches, arrests, confiscations, including confiscation of all equipment: computers, laptops, telephones, cameras, media, etc. Similar problems were not detected in the two other cases. The closed archives and the lack of access to archival documents remain problematic in Belarus as well. Consequently, the best situation out of the three countries is in Ukraine, where the legislature enables highest standards of accessibility to state archives, and researchers are allowed to take photocopies with their own camera.[7]

The digitization process in all three organizations is still ongoing and not completed at the moment of writing. The following are the scanning and/or document conversion processes that the organizations use:

- IDFI – the scanner used by IDFI has an optical character recognition function. Documents are preserved in the PDF format.
- CSLM - 300 dpi for documents and at least 600 dpi for images and photos. Saving it in TIFF and JPEG format. For publishing on Digital Archive – PDF files (without OCR).
- Belarusian organization – uses both: scanning and photographing. Character recognition is not used, since most of the documents are handwritten or not of a good quality. Hence, it is easier/useful to type manually than to use recognition.

All three organizations have their own digital storages (servers) and none of them use online media storages. In this matter, all three of them are struggling with storage limitations and have to add storage space over time.

Capacity to maintain files sustainably and over a long period of time is approached and regulated differently across the organizations: IDFI uses several backup memory devices, as well as cloud storage. As for CSLM, Digital Archive is a permanent project of the organization and they ensure technical support for it within the frameworks of different related projects. The Belarusian CSO does not use cloud storage and they have to face the constant threat of a search by local authorities that might lead to confiscation of materials. They address a partner organization from Czech Republic and videos they create are stored on that organization's website.

A constant challenge for all these organizations is the continual search for financing and fundraising to sustain their archives, as these CSOs depend on grants to operate.

Methodology and Shared Expertise

The organizations do not seem to posses any particularly distinctive tools, software, guidelines, toolkits, and/or shared knowledge used in their operations. Consequently, the organizations think they have nothing innovative in this direction to share with other CSOs.

Of these organizations, only the Ukrainian CSO has developed a methodology for digitalizing and describing documents for their own platform. This is an internal working document, not available to or of use for the public. IDFI and the Belarusian organization have not developed a similar, distinctive methodology, and they rely on generally accepted standards. IDFI believes that descriptions and other finding aid documents should be adapted to the standards of the digital archive's description by the State Archives in the country, so that later - if they can be handed over by the organization to the state archives - there will be no necessity for re-description and renewal of finding aid documents. Alternatively, in the description process, the ICA records management standard might be deployed as well.[8]

Dublin Core is a coding method used by the Ukrainian organization. Georgian and Belarusian organizations have not introduced coding methods in their activities.

None of the organizations have a developed policy on information analysis, nor any appropriate systems to tag and create relationships between various entities and codebooks. Similarly, the organizations have not developed security protocols to protect documentation and the safety of interviewees. The introduction of such principles is the most relevant for the Belarusian organization, as their respondents are often the victims of ongoing political repression. IDFI and CSLM respondents are mostly the victims of the Soviet repressions and therefore face fewer physical threats.

All three organizations have to cooperate with state institutions, mainly state archives, libraries, and other organizations. In this case, too, the archival openness rating developed by IDFI is directly correlated with the degree of cooperation: the more open a state organization is, the more they collaborate with the CSOs in the country. In this milieu, the best situation is found in the Ukrainian case. One way is almost always working in the Georgian case: if the initiative comes from a Western partner organization, governmental agencies always cooperate with CSOs.

Database and Security Protocols

Some well-known software products are used for managing databases: Google Drive, Microsoft package, etc. For CSLM and IDFI, their database is accessible not only from the office but also from remote locations. The Belarusian CSO states that their databases are available online from anywhere. There were no external consultants supporting CSLM and IDFI in developing their databases, while the Belarusian organization's databases were supported in the frames of various other projects.

In order to back-up databases, IDFI renders hard drives where the server information is backed up once every 24 hours. CSLM keeps digital copies on the servers of the organization and has an automatic system for documents back-ups. The Belarusian CSO states that their databases are "just copied." The latter has not provided any further information on any additional database back-up practices.

None of the organizations use the entity relationship model. Exporting options for all three CSO's are mainly: .pdf and .xls format files, with the Belarusian CSO also storing photos in the .jpg format. None of the organizations possess an option for automatic uploading of electronic files and data.

Since one of the main directions of these organizations is to advocate for archival openness and ensure highest possible transparency, the CSOs agree with the principle that their documents should be accessible byanyone interested. Therefore, there is just one level of access for users: they can download any amount of documents free of charge and without registration. This is also due to the fact that organizations do not keep the sort of documents, the publication of which would be contrary to the laws on the protection of personal data or state secrets. All three organizations have a working password policy.

Personnel and Organizational Capacity

Based on the answers, it is a priority for all three organizations to hire skillful staff who already have the knowledge and experience in an area of digital archiving. Most of the CSLM members hold degrees in History or Political Science, IDFI's head of Memory and Disinformation Direction, who is responsible for digital archiving, has an extensive experience of working in the state archives for many years. Of the three organizations, only CSLM staff received several weeks of training to work with the Digital Archive. Other organizations and staff have not yet received a training and awareness raising in this area.

Since the performance and functionality of the organizations depend on external funding and project-based finances, additional resources - both human and financial – are named as a top priority by all three organizations. At the moment, the organizations suffer from a lack of such resources, to different degrees: 10 employees work for the Belarusian CSO, 5 at CSLM, and 3 at IDFI on this direction.

Institutional memory as well as the knowledge and experience of individual team members and long-term cooperation with them is crucial for the organizations. The founders of IDFI have been involved in the process of creating and storing archives since 2009. Furthermore, all of the documents created within the frameworks of different projects are preserved on special servers accessible by IDFI's staff. These documents include progress reports, lists of preserved materials, and other detailed information about the activities carried out by IDFI staff. By preserving these documents on a server in an organized manner, the maintenance of institutional memory is ensured. As for CSLM, it has developed a detailed, written instructions for every type of work needed for keeping the Digital Archive. CSLM also maintains the practice of sharing work experience with a successor among the employees (before or after finishing his/her work). In the case of the Belarusian organization, such institutional memory and knowledge is dependent on a single person - the entire database is kept by the manager, which ensures the preservation of data.

Following the general trend of CSOs in the region, digital archives are developed within the frameworks of various projects and supported by various funds. However, these projects - related to the creation of digital archives - were mainly initiated by the organizations themselves.

At this point, the organizations' archival direction is financially sustainable. For example, IDFI has core funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), which makes archival research and digital archives of IDFI rather financially sustainable. However, like CSLM, IDFI is in the process of constant fundraising in order to make the project more sustainable and incorporate new elements into it.

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAYS FORWARD

All the organizations find the matter of the future usage of the collected documentation crucial. IDFI believes that the documentation it is collecting is to be a source for students and researchers who work online with primary sources. State archives in Georgia, due to their size and number of documents kept there, are less likely to publish materials in the form of collections. IDFI collects documents that are highly relevant as well as important for the issues concerning society and are useful in research. In addition to archival materials, IDFI's numerous research papers in social, economic, political, judicial, media, and other related areas are to represent the best archival sources in the future for assessing the trends over the years. CSLM hopes that these documents will help researchers in studying and understanding the different issues of the Ukrainian and Soviet history of the XX century. As for the Belarusian organization, it hopes that the Institute of National Remembrance/Memory will be established in Belarus someday, and everything the organization has collected will be transferred to it.

For all three organizations, digital archives have helped increase the organization's capacity, visibility, and/or information-sharing capabilities. In general, the departing point for all three organizations was to collect archival documents, disseminate them, and encourage further research. IDFI is currently implementing many important projects in Georgia as well as internationally in the directions of freedom of information, which includes important areas for many states: economic, socio-political, anti-corruption, judiciary, etc. Freedom and accessibility of state archives were at the forefront during the organization's establishment and the development of it started precisely from there.

All three organizations have launched new partnerships or programs with universities, archives, libraries, European and US networks, embassies, foundations, etc., as a result of digital archiving.

Current challenges vary according to the working profile of the organization. Such obstacles are most noticeable in the case of the Belarusian organization, since the repressions and human right abuses that the organization follows and collects the information about are still taking place in the contemporary reality there. IDFI indicated the following issues it faces: openness and accessibility of the state archives in Georgia (especially the high cost of document scanning, which has not changes even as a result of the work and advocacy of IDFI and similar organizations). The situation is better for CSLM in these regards: they launched their project in 2013, when the Soviet archives were hardly accessible. After the adoption of a relevant Law in 2015, the organization has gotten a lot more opportunities for digitizing all the documents they were interested in.

Furthermore, elaboration of the proper policy for cataloguing and describing archival materials is the most important aspect of the process of scanning and digitizing archival documents. Many organizations choose to start scanning while they have not worked on a coherent approach to this process, which further complicates the task and makes digitized materials almost useless.

IDFI believes that proper cataloging and creation of descriptions and finding aid documents – according to the procedures established in the country - are crucial. Sooner or later, the organization's digital archives will increase in number and it will be a good gesture and practical approach if they are handed over to the state archives, as it will gather a lot of interesting information. Before handing them over, it is important that the documents are described in such a way that their re-description does not become necessary. For example, in the 2000s, the National Archives of Georgia received several dozen funds about the First Republic of Georgia from the Harvard and Leville collections$_9$, which were organized/described respectively by the institutions where they were kept. The National Archives of Georgia dismantled the collections of documents and re-described them at its discretion. As a result, it is impossible to find documents with the old description numbers that some researchers used before the 2000s, as the documents have acquired new numbering since then.

CONCLUSION

The questionnaire provided by GIJTR, HLC, and ICSC is essential for CSOs to properly understand their needs in the process of creating digital archives. Apart from self-reflection, the report of the questionnaire can serve as a guide for planning further steps for addressing the individual as well as shared concerns, challenges, and obstacles. It also demonstrates the approaches and methods for creating/keeping digital archives developed across different cases, the justifications behind them, and the possibilities for sharing best practices on the regional level.

It is a noteworthy finding that only one of the organizations has developed and implemented different types of relevant methodologies, such as coding methods, information analysis, ways of tagging and creating relationships across various entities and codebooks. Among the reasons that the other organizations name for abstaining from such methodological advancements is the relatively low array of archival documentation collected by them at the moment. Even though for the moment searching for and identifying archival documentation is not a challenge, the introduction of such methodologies will eventually become a necessity following an increase in the numbers of archived documentation.

Cooperation and joint projects on the national as well as international levels seem to have positively affected the development of the CSO's archives and their digitalization process. Such effectiveness is significantly related to the openness of state archival systems in the countries and the quality of cooperation with other CSOs. In countries where state archives are open and accessible, CSO research organizations work more effectively, and vice versa. In some cases, such as Georgia, the international (Western) incentives encourage state archives to cooperate with the local CSOs, which, in the case of IDFI, has led to considerable developments not only in researchinging but also advocating for the openness of the archives in the country and internationally.

Another issue is related to the financial (in)dependence on external sources and grants that challenge the organizations to create, maintain, or update the avenues for their archival research as well as for advancing the digitalization of their archives. Apart from the restrictions to financial and human resources affecting each of the examined organizations, the legislative and political situation in the state seems to be affecting the way the CSOs approach, store, and develop their archival data. This becomes particularly concerning in the case of the Belarusian organization, with threats of data confiscation and possible risks concerning the researchers. On the other hand, the legislative changes in the Ukrainian law have positively affected the openness of the archives and subsequent digitalization of the archival data by the CSO.

References

1. Alexander Lukashenko (b. 1954) - Soviet nomenclature worker. In 1990 he was elected a Member of Parliament of the Belarusian SSR. In 1991, he was the only MP to oppose the collapse of the Soviet Union. Mr Lukashenko has been President of Belarus since 1994 and is often seen as a advocate of communist principles in the country. Moreover, influential Western organizations accuse him of dictatorship and repression in modern times. See: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-Lukashenko / https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/europes-last-dictator-the-rise-and-possible-fall-of-alexander-lukashenko/
2. http://www.open-archives.org/en/pages/methodology
3. http://www.open-archives.org/en/rating
4. At the request of the Belarusian organization, their name in the study is not credited, since, according to the organization "the situation in modern Belarus is very difficult-the peak of repression against all forms of human rights activities."
5. https://naviny.belsat.eu/en/news/i-stopped-decommunization-lukashenka-proud-of-bolshevik-heritage/
6. http://www.cevro.cz/web_files/soubory/democracy-guide/democracy-guide-2019/MN-DTG%202019%20-%20(07)%20The%20Georgian%20Experience.pdf
7. The Openness of State Archives in the Former Soviet Republics and Eastern Bloc Countries - the Outcomes of the Evaluation - http://www.open-archives.org/uploadimages/news/Openness-of-State-Archives-in-in-the-Former-Soviet-Republics-and-Eastern-%20ENG.pdf
8. https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/Relationships_archival_descriptive_standards.pdf
9. https://archive.gov.ge/en/sakartvelos-pirveli-respublika-1

GIJTR
Global Initiative for Justice,
Truth & Reconciliation