Russia is currently suffering an overwhelming crisis — political, economic, spiritual and ecological, but the human rights movement, on the other hand, is not experiencing any crisis at all. Quite the opposite, in fact it is rapidly developing. Of course there are some difficulties, but the movement tends to overcome them just like any healthy organism overcomes the diseases of growth. The human rights movement in our country has a 30-year old history. This relatively positive history may be divided into two periods: the Soviet period (1965—1991, the classic and heroic one) and the modern one (1991 to the present day, the Russian one). Throughout the modern period, the movement has changed so tremendously that we could speak actually of the ending of the human rights movement after the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent formation of some new public movement, but the goal of this movement has still remained the same — to protect man from the State. The movement’s major principles have also remained the same — non-violent resistance to violence and lawlessness and using openness (‘glasnost’) as the primary means by which to combat this evil.

Still, it is just as difficult to recognize the features of the old movement in the new one as it is to recognize the traits of a baby in an adult person. This is not only the result of the natural ripening of the movement. The USSR and Russia are two different states. Hence, the human rights problems are different for these two states and the methods of solving them are therefore also different. During the Soviet period, we did not really protect the rights of man — we never had such an opportunity. We could do nothing other than to declare that man has certain rights, and the State must not violate them. In Russia, though, human rights activists have had an opportunity to proceed from words to actions. Currently, the primary trend of the human rights movement consists of protecting the specific rights of specific people. In the USSR, severe persecutions presented the major obstacle for human rights activists. In Russia, thank God, people are rarely arrested for their convictions, and hence, such arrests are no longer a factor that restrains the movement’s development. It should here be said that human rights activists’ demands that one should not be persecuted for one’s convictions and beliefs have been satisfied. The movement’s other principal demand from the Soviet period — freedom of speech and freedom of the press — has also been satisfied. Certainly, that freedom is not complete, but the citizens’ level of awareness has grown enormously when compared to Soviet times.

The development of civil liberties became the very factor that changed the image of the human rights movement. Throughout the entire Soviet period, the movement was almost completely concentrated in Moscow, and at any given moment only a few dozen activists participated, and during moments of
upsurge, say one or two hundred people. Presently, over a hundred human
rights organizations are active in Moscow, and Moscow human rights activists
represent only a small part of the contemporary human rights movement. It
would be difficult to find a Russian city where not a single human rights group
exists. In relatively large cities, there are usually several groups, sometimes
even several dozen. Keeping in mind that in Russia there are more than a
thousand cities, we can roughly approximate the overall number of human
rights activists in the country. We are talking about several thousands of people
or maybe even a few tens of thousands. These people are teachers, managers,
lawyers, journalists, and qualified workers with different profiles.

The legal foundation of the movement has also changed. During the
Soviet period, human rights activists rejected the social order based on the
principle of 'man exists for the benefit of the State'. They demanded the
replacement of this principle with its exact opposite — 'the State exists for the
benefit of man'. The Soviet Constitution could not serve as a legal foundation
for the demands to comply with human rights. Hence, Soviet human rights
activists founded their demands on international agreements protecting human
rights, many of which the Soviet Union had ratified. The situation of
contemporary human rights activists is better. In relation to citizens' rights and
liberties, the Constitution of the Russian Federation is on the same level as the
legislation of the most advanced democratic countries in the modern world.
Now, human rights activists demand that state officials act in accordance with
the Constitution and the legislature of the Russian Federation, never violating
them. Human rights activists are now able to protect citizens' rights by
addressing the prosecutors' offices as well as the bodies of executive and
legislative power.

During the Soviet period, human rights activists mostly functioned as
'exposers'. Presently, oral and written declarations and protests against human
rights violations represent only one small constituent human rights activity.
Mainly, this consists of everyday thorough and routine work with the purpose
of providing legal support, compiling documents for prosecutors' offices, the
courts, various state institutions and visiting all these organizations. Such
functions do not seem as impressive as those during the dissident period, but
they are much more effective from the point of view of protecting the rights of
each specific person.

An emphasis on economic, social and cultural rights
Provincial human rights organizations started appearing in the late 1980s, even
before the fall of the Soviet Union. But, most of the presently active regional
human rights organizations were founded after the Russian Constitution had
been enacted at the end of 1993. From the very beginning, regional human
rights organizations have differed from the Moscow ones. Just like in the past,
Moscow human rights organizations focus their efforts on civil and political
rights. In provincial cities, on the other hand, most of the organizations are
primarily preoccupied with social problems, because this is the 'social demand'