

# Obituary: farewell to Irina Kozulina



Our dear friend Irina Kozulina, the regional representative for RRI in Eastern Europe, has died of breast cancer.

When she first received her diagnosis of breast cancer in 1997, Irina was working full-time as a mathematician at Minsk University. At the same time, her husband Aleksandr Kozulin was entering

into politics in Belarus. Battling cancer, handling chemotherapy, and helping her husband navigate the Belarusian political landscape was a little too much for one person to handle, so Irina left her job at the university and dedicated the rest of her life to activism.

While working with her husband in politics, her personal experience of breast cancer convinced her that she also needed to help other women in her situation in Belarus and beyond. After training as a volunteer, she formed an organization called Rays of Hope, promoting the RRI strategy in Belarus – a difficult task, as it took time to learn how to raise awareness of breast cancer, bring

women together and work with the government health-care system. Shortage of funds was a challenge, but Irina had energy to spare.

In 2006, Irina's husband was sentenced to five and a half years prison for organizing mass protests against a presidential election widely seen as rigged. While appealing internationally for his release, Irina kept up her own work: she co-organized an international breast cancer conference in Minsk in September 2007, and obtained permission from the Belarusian health-care system for volunteers to visit breast cancer patients in hospitals in Minsk.

By then, she knew her time was limited. She lived the last months of her life trying to prove by her own example that life with cancer can be rich and fulfilling, and that cancer cannot take the spirit and motivation from a person.

“The fact of illness is not a reason for self-isolation,” Irina wrote in her book on her struggle with breast cancer. “I believe that life should go on, and that illness is not a good reason to disturb its course. It is necessary to try in all cases to do everything you can so that those around you continue to live a full life. And you should also live a full life.”

Irina never finished her book. She died on 23 February 2008. Following national and international protests, her husband was freed for three days to attend her funeral.

