

OPEN SOCIETY

SOROS FOUNDATIONS NETWORK NEWS
FALL | 2009

NEWS



Eastern Europe:
Where Do Open Societies
Stand 20 Years Later?

OPEN SOCIETY NEWS

FALL 2009

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FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPHY

AP Wide World Photos: People celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, Berlin, November 1989 (Lionel Cironneau)

BACK COVER

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The Open Society Institute works to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. To achieve its mission, OSI seeks to shape public policies that assure greater fairness in political, legal, and economic systems and safeguard fundamental rights. On a local level, OSI implements a range of initiatives to advance justice, education, public health, and independent media. At the same time, OSI builds alliances across borders and continents on issues such as corruption and freedom of information. OSI places a high priority on protecting and improving the lives of marginalized people and communities.

Investor and philanthropist George Soros in 1993 created OSI as a private operating and grantmaking foundation to support his foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Those foundations were established, starting in 1984, to help countries make the transition from communism. OSI has expanded the activities of the Soros foundations network to encompass the United States and more than 70 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Each Soros foundation relies on the expertise of boards composed of eminent citizens who determine individual agendas based on local priorities.

Open Society News, published by the Open Society Institute in New York, reports on programs and issues critical to advancing open society throughout the network and the world.

For additional information, see the Soros foundations network website at www.soros.org or contact the Open Society Institute, 400 West 59th Street, New York, NY 10019, USA; TEL (212) 548-0600; FAX (212) 548-4605; or email wkramer@sorosny.org

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As I read the stories in this issue of *Open Society News*, I was often struck with a sense of exhilaration. Annette Laborey's adventures behind the Iron Curtain and Sergei Kovalev's efforts to advance human rights in communist Russia serve as triumphant vindications of years of patient and often dangerous work by people committed to open society. The speed with which communism collapsed in many countries was matched by the speed with which new institutions took its place. Within days or weeks, policymakers and citizens formed governments, scheduled elections, and developed laws. George Soros himself was swept up by the change, establishing 18 new foundations in the region between 1989 and 1992. Heather Grabbe depicts the longer-term effect of how former communist states aspiring for EU membership prompted the European Union to pay more attention to human rights and social policy issues in candidate countries.

There is no doubt that the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the unleashing of a vast amount of human creativity and potential as people took advantage of new freedoms and new political and economic opportunities. Vaclav Havel notes that he is constantly amazed by how much ingenuity had slumbered within people.

But the changes also brought unseen levels of greed and poverty, new forms of corruption, and, as Slavenka Drakulic highlights, confusion and alienation as people struggled to redefine their roles and responsibilities within a quickly changing social order. Istvan Rev points out one of the ironies of democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe: it has allowed for the participation of groups that want to destroy democracy, such as fascists and extreme nationalists. On a broader level, Nils Muiznieks writes about how people's commitment to building open society is often overwhelmed by individual concerns about success or failure in the region's new, market-driven societies.

After two decades of transition, Central and Eastern Europe and parts of the former Soviet Union have been largely transformed for the better. But as George Soros and Aryeh Neier both note, the change has been uneven and, in some areas and on some issues, there has been stagnation and setback. The collapse of communism has been a boon for open society but has also fostered a host of new and significant challenges that we must continue to address.

Will Kramer

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In Revolutionary Times the **Impossible** Becomes **Possible**

A man hammers away at the Berlin Wall, November 1989.

Open Society Institute Chairman George Soros writes about how his foundation network, overcoming obstacles and setbacks, helped countries in Eastern Europe change from closed to open societies.

GEORGE SOROS

I SET UP MY FIRST FOUNDATION IN HUNGARY IN 1984. The idea behind it was simple. The state dogma, promoted by the ruling communists, was false, and by providing an alternative we could expose its falsehood. Accordingly, we supported every cultural initiative that was not an expression of the established dogma.

I was guided by the concept of “open society,” which I adopted from the philosopher Karl Popper. I saw open society as a more sophisticated form of social organization than the totalitarian closed societies of the Soviet bloc.

The latter were trying to implement central plans; in an open

society every individual or organization was supposed to implement their own plan. To make the transition from a closed to an open society would require outside help and that was what my foundations sought to provide.

In Hungary, the authorities insisted on having a controlling presence on the foundation's board. We eventually agreed to appoint two chief executives, one nominated by them and one by me.

The project succeeded beyond my expectations. With very small amounts of money people could engage in a wide variety of civic initiatives ranging from self-governing student colleges to zither clubs.

One of our first projects was to offer photocopying machines to cultural and scientific institutions in exchange for local currency. We used the money to give out local grants and support all kinds of unofficial initiatives, but the photocopying machines also did a lot of good.

Up until then, the few existing copy machines were literally held under lock and key—as more and more became available, the party apparatus lost control of the machines and the dissemination of information.

We did not have to exercise direct control. Civil society watched over

But the foundations were the first out of the gate everywhere. I remembered the lesson my father who had lived through the Russian Revolution in Siberia taught me: In revolutionary times, things that are normally impossible become possible.

In Ukraine, we set up the International Renaissance Foundation before Ukraine became independent. In Tajikistan, we persevered with the foundation during the five-year civil war although we had no way of controlling its activities. Our impact was the greatest during that turbulent period.

When I set up the foundations in Eastern Europe, I hoped the open societies of the West would follow in my footsteps, but in that regard I was disappointed. Unwilling to burden their own budgets, they gave the job to the International Monetary Fund, which was ill suited to the task.

The IMF was accustomed to signing letters of intent with governments, making the continuation of their programs conditional on the governments fulfilling their obligations. The countries of Eastern Europe fared better, but in the former Soviet states, one after another, the programs largely failed.

East Germany was the exception: West Germany was willing to make the sacrifices that were necessary to integrate it. Eventually, the

“When I set up the foundations in Eastern Europe, I hoped the open societies of the West would follow in my footsteps, but in that regard I was disappointed.”

the foundation. For instance, we were warned that an association of the blind, to whom we gave a grant for talking books, was stealing some of the money. With a budget of \$3 million, the foundation had more influence on the cultural life of Hungary than the Ministry of Culture.

Encouraged by my success in Hungary, I proceeded to set up foundations in Poland, China, and the Soviet Union. As the Soviet empire collapsed, and eventually the Soviet Union and also Yugoslavia disintegrated, we continued to expand. By 1992 there were foundations in 22 countries and expenditures had reached \$53 million. A year later we were spending nearly \$184 million.

Right at the beginning, I had a disagreement with the Polish board about the way the foundation should be run. But that taught me a lesson. They were right and I was wrong. I realized that the people living there understood their country better than I did and I deferred to their judgment.

It did not always work. In Bulgaria, a board member who made his name as a human rights activist turned out to be a racist. A Latvian businessman sought to hijack the foundation for nationalist purposes. It was the Russian foundation that gave us the most trouble; we had to reorganize it twice.

countries of Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states, also made the grade when the European Union gave them accession. But the rest of the former Soviet Union in the Caucasus and Central Asia never succeeded in making the transition.

This has left a bitter legacy. Rightly or wrongly, both the rulers and the people of Russia harbor a deep resentment against the West, which the West has not come to grips with.

The new order in Moscow that has emerged out of the chaos of the 1990s is very far from an open society. It is an authoritarian regime that preserves the outward appearances of democracy but derives its power from its control of Russia's national resources.

The regime uses those resources to maintain itself in power, to personally enrich the rulers, and to exercise influence over its neighborhood, both in Europe and in the former Soviet sphere.

But the ideal of an open society is difficult to suppress, and I have not given up hope.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the activities of the Open Society Institute and the Soros foundations network, go to www.soros.org.



Then presidential candidate Vaclav Havel waves to supporters in Prague, December 1989.

Freedom Rises and Spreads After the Fall

Author and playwright Vaclav Havel, the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic, was central to the region's transformation and the civic spirit that he describes here as "the driving force of our revolutions."

VACLAV HAVEL

THIS YEAR WE COMMEMORATE the 20th anniversary of the moment when the Iron Curtain finally fell. For four decades, it had divided not only Europe, but also, in a sense, the entire world. Although there were attempts to break free from totalitarian communist domination during the Cold War, in 1989 the changes in Central Europe and later in the countries of Eastern Europe took place almost simultaneously, thanks above all to favorable international circumstances and the political changes in the erstwhile Soviet Union. Perhaps most significant was that the revolutions—the take-over of power and the establishment of new democratic conditions—took place peacefully. None of us knew beforehand when the moment would come, but we all believed that it would.

Human freedom, the human spirit, solidarity, enterprise, natural community, and the yearning to associate cannot be imprisoned behind concrete walls and barbed wire forever. However, the epoch-making political changes were not the first manifestation of free civic will; this civic spirit was a constant, natural presence and provided the impetus for change and the driving force of our revolutions. One never ceased to be amazed at how many ideas and how much ingenuity—inexpressible in the conditions of the totalitarian communist state—slumbered within people.

Naturally not everything that happened stayed the course, not everything was felicitous, and not everything was done with good intentions. But what I, for one, found fascinating was the fact that those who had spent most, if not all, of their lives in conditions of "unfreedom" immediately and spontaneously drew inspiration from the traditions that existed here for centuries. It did not need very much: simply removing the restrictions on free civic will.

The first major state visit in what was still Czechoslovakia was by the German President Richard von Weizsacker in 1990. During that visit, he told me that if civil society were to weaken this would in turn weaken the political parties and leadership that grew out of it. He put his finger on what I had always thought about politics, namely that politics is a formulated expression of civil society, from which

it derives and to which it relates as its root and meaning, whenever circumstances require. After all, political parties and movements are nothing but a specific expression of civic will and civic positions, and as such they are part and parcel of civil society. In addition, however, there are countless public service organizations, university communities, churches, and cultural, educational, environmental, and humanitarian foundations and civic associations without which the life of society would be inconceivable at the beginning of the 21st century.

I recall vividly—and it's something we should commemorate and give thanks for—that among those who tirelessly supported civil society in Central and Eastern European countries was George Soros and his network of foundations and institutes. Without the contributions from him and his network, the fundamental political changes would not have taken root so quickly in the civic consciousness of people throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

In our part of the world, civil society has undergone a tempestuous development over the past 20 years, and during that period its basic features and conditions have stabilized. Central Europe is now an open and engaged participant in international events, and every single thing that happens elsewhere in the world will sooner or later have an effect on it. Nothing is final or cut and dried, however. New civic structures are emerging in response to fresh challenges. Countless international organizations have established offices and operations here. Their presence is the only way to ensure that states continue to function and do not founder every time a government falls or some political scandal comes to light. This too is an expression of wide-ranging and functioning free civil societies.

I don't know how things will turn out, but I have the feeling that in the next two decades there will be a real need for us to enhance what we have achieved and experienced so far. Thanks to its membership in the European Union, Central Europe and its people have the opportunity, for the first time in centuries, to live in and firmly establish conditions of freedom. It is now largely up to the people to decide how to make the best use of this opportunity.

“Human freedom, the human spirit, solidarity, enterprise, natural community, and the yearning to associate cannot be imprisoned behind concrete walls and barbed wire forever.”



Creating the “Open Society Man” (and Woman!)

People pass bust of Latvian communist author and politician Vilis Lacis as they go to vote on Latvian independence, 1991.

As a political scientist, Soros Foundation–Latvia board member, vice chairman of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, and former government cabinet member, Nils Muiznieks has seen the ups and downs of transition from almost every angle. In the article below, he assesses how deeply citizens in Latvia and elsewhere have internalized open society values and practices.

NILS MUIZNIEKS

THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE COLLAPSE of communism in the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe is a good occasion for revisiting some of the assumptions that have guided the work of the Open Society Institute during the region’s “transition.” Many of us (that is veteran staff, board members, and/or grantees of the various branches of the Open Society Institute) assumed that within two decades we could help create a new “open society man.” This “new

man”—*homo sorosensus*—would replace *homo sovieticus*, whose remains would slowly decompose on the ash heap of history (located in a dark alley behind the gleaming main streets of the new, “normal” open societies we would build).

This new “open society man” (and woman!) would be committed to democracy and the rule of law, exhibit civic courage when necessary, be respectful (not just tolerant) of minorities, support socially equitable

Voices from Transition

SIMON PANEK Czech Republic

Student leader during the 1989 Velvet Revolution, founder and current director of Czech human rights NGO, People In Need, former board chair of the Open Society Fund–Prague

BEFORE

My parents were always very outspoken. My father spent 11 years in prison during Stalinism. I read books that were prohibited, listened to free radio. Before 1989 I took part regularly in different demonstrations. I studied in the natural sciences faculty at Charles University from 1986. Even the communists didn't care about birds. We weren't scared to talk to each other about political things. Not organize, but at least talk without the fear that someone would take notes and refer you to the secret police.

I remember sitting with friends and seriously discussing leaving the country for three or four years and then returning. We could be imprisoned for a year, but traveling and seeing the world would be worth the price. It would be better than spending all of our lives in a kind of prison like the closed country where we were then.

AFTER

Today the biggest thing is freedom, not only freedom to travel, but speech, freedom of opinion. Slowly, but steadily, governments, ministries, offices, these institutions more and more are starting to be a service for individuals. My NGO, People in Need, is often in opposition to government officials on some policies. But we can have a dialogue with them. We have faith we can say what we want. It's not a risk anymore. The previous regime was based on lies. Everyone was lying to everyone.

What is important is that we can be responsible for our lives. No one, not state or party, is saying we are responsible on behalf of you. It's painful for lots of people in the former communist countries, especially older people. It's difficult and painful to be again fully responsible for our lives. For me it is a joy!

I think we are still in the transition process in a lot of things like education. We must wait for the first post-communist generation. So it will take another 10 or 20 years before we are much closer to having really good stable democracies where the government and politics are serving the people. My father always used to say to me: "Remember, it will take the same amount of time to repair society as it took for the communists to destroy it."



markets, and be a good European while remaining a responsible global citizen. The new open society man and woman would have no experience with rigid ideology and suppression of critical thought. Instead he or she would have acquired some education at Central European University or farther West (preferably the UK or the United States), yet would remain committed to participating in the economic and political life of a reformed Central and Eastern Europe. After a polite interlude of “dual power” with segments of the old guard, the new generation would assume most positions of political, economic, and cultural power in the new democracies of the East.

By the time the new millennium began, or, at the latest, with accession to the European Union and NATO, the old elites would have largely left the scene. Survivors would have changed beyond recognition. Gone would be the old apparatchik, the party hack, the chameleon who shed socialist clothes to become an overnight nationalist. He (seldom she) would have either retired or been marginalized by the new open society elites. The remaining dinosaurs would be socialized into at least publicly professing acceptance of open society values through convincing and relentless arguments from civil society and Europe. The new open society man and woman would gradually displace the old elite and contribute to the stabilization of market and democratic institutions in a new Europe.

So how much of the vision has come to fruition? When I survey the landscape in Latvia and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, I find that only parts of this vision have materialized. The basic infrastructure

(communist youth organization) and the communist-era security services. They benefited from nomenklatura privatization in the 1990s and have proved very adaptable and resourceful in maintaining their influence in the new system through contacts, ruthlessness, and just plain smarts. They have also been able to draw many younger generation elites into their political and economic projects, socializing them into the “old ways.”

While portions of the younger generation do resemble *homo sorosensus*, many of the leading lights in the younger generation remain disengaged from civic life and are far more interested in doing well rather than doing good. Others have emigrated, often after exposure to elite Western institutions of higher education and the lack of well-paying, interesting jobs at home. With the global financial crisis, many more are considering emigration out of disgust for the incompetence of their leaders, disappointment with the general direction of development, and a lack of faith in the short- to medium-term prospects for their country. Several of my former colleagues in the human rights world now live and work abroad. When I ask these smart, young professionals whether they would consider coming back to Latvia, they sigh and ask, “To do what? For what kind of pay?”

The crisis has destroyed or at least weakened some old “oligarchs” and the old parties of power. This, however, does not necessarily mean *homo sorosensus* will ride to the rescue on a white horse. More often, the potential horsemen in Central and Eastern Europe tend to be nationalist populists, decrying the corruption of the old elite and the

“Many of the leading lights in the younger generation remain disengaged from civic life and are far more interested in doing well rather than doing good.”

of market democracy is in place. Multiparty, competitive elections have become the norm, civilians control the military, independent media and NGOs abound, the legitimacy of private property is now understood, and judiciaries, though often weak, are gaining strength and adopting European and international norms. But while all the trappings of democracy are present, the quality is often not what we hoped for, and there are lingering doubts about its durability, especially in the face of the global economic crisis and a Russia that is not only nurturing authoritarianism at home, but striving to export it to neighbors as well.

Homo sorosensus coexists with *homo sovieticus* and what could be called *homo pragmaticus*. In Latvia, some members of the younger generation have assumed important posts: The newly elected mayor of the capital Riga, the first politician of Russian-speaking origin to achieve such prominence, is 33 years old. The prime minister is only 38 and has already served several years as a deputy in the European Parliament. However, despite some new faces, many of the old elites are still pulling strings behind the scenes. The old elites in Latvia and in much of the region derive primarily from the former Komsomol

corrosive impact on society of various minorities and foreign-funded “liberals.” Rather than being seduced by these peddlers of easy answers to complex questions, many members of the younger generation are simply disoriented. They had never known hardship, but now they have lost jobs for which they were paid more than they should have been and can no longer afford the mortgages on their new apartments or the payments for their new cars.

We should not give up on the ideal of creating *homo sorosensus*. There is now a small, but firmly established segment of the population that has grown out of the transition process and influences public debates, monitors the activities of those in power, and works to improve the plight of the socially excluded. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is becoming clear to me, however, that the task of developing an open society will be a longer process than expected. As we think about our future efforts, we should continue to strengthen individuals and groups that already support open society but also make it more relevant to those who remain angry or disillusioned with what transition has brought.

Days of **Dissent** and **Dreams** of Democracy

Border crossings, the smuggling of cash and books, support for dissidents to visit the West, nights of vodka-fueled conversation. OSI Senior Writer Chuck Sudetic tells of the life and times of Annette Laborey, executive director of OSI-Paris, who in the 1980s helped dissidents behind the Iron Curtain survive and triumph.

CHUCK SUDETIC

ANNETTE LABOREY MADE MANY FORAYS into communist Eastern Europe. She sometimes visited alone, carrying cash stuffed in her bra for her friends. Sometimes she traveled with her brother in his old Volvo, once with a small printing press he had concealed beneath her seat to smuggle to political dissidents in Hungary. On other occasions, she packed her kids, some of them infants, into a camper van with food and luggage, diapers and bottles, and books and candy, and set off eastward. They passed through border crossings along the Iron Curtain, without drawing the attention of glowering guards. They stopped wherever they wanted. They stayed, ate, and drank late into the night with friends, old and new. All along the way, Laborey expanded a network of writers, thinkers, and artists and helped chip away the totalitarian monolith.

Then, during a return trip to Paris from Poland in the summer of 1981, the halcyon days of Solidarity when there was nothing to eat except in hard-currency shops and restaurants for foreigners, Laborey realized that her mission would soon be accomplished.

“Les jeux sont faits,” she said to herself.

“The game is over,” she told her program officer at the Ford Foundation. “It may last years, but it is over. Everything is going to change.”

The next eight years witnessed the deaths of communist party general secretaries Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko, a stifling debt crisis, economic dysfunction, martial law in Poland, winters of no heat and little food in Romania, the fallout from Chernobyl, and Gorbachev’s promises of glasnost and perestroika. By 1989, people from East Germany were making their way to Hungary’s border with Austria and using wire cutters to snip holes in the security fence to escape. When word spread that no one had shot at them, Germans wielding sledge hammers began beating the Berlin Wall into submission.

Annette Laborey worked for a Paris-based organization that is now all but forgotten except by writers, academics, historians, and other Eastern European intellectuals. The Foundation for Mutual



Annette Laborey (center) at picnic after conference in Krakow, Poland, 1991.

Support Among Europe’s Intellectuals (Fondation pour une Entraide Intellectuelle Européenne) had its genesis in the Western reaction to communist efforts to co-opt intellectuals around the globe and, during the years immediately after World War II, to coerce independent-thinking intellectuals in the countries of Eastern Europe occupied by the Red Army.

In 1950, a group of intellectuals gathered in Berlin to found the Congress of Cultural Freedom, an organization that took up the cause of liberal thought in the war of ideas against the communist East. With covert funding from the Central Intelligence Agency, the congress reached out to intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain, sponsoring conferences and renowned literary journals such as *Encounter*, *Preuves*, *Der Monat*, and *Tempo presente*. In 1966, just before a scandal erupted over its links with the CIA, the congress began funding the foundation.

The congress succumbed, but the foundation survived. Supported by the Ford Foundation, and without any government funding, it worked both openly and clandestinely to nurture free intellectual life in Eastern Europe and, for a time, in Spain and Portugal, which were under right-wing dictatorships. The foundation smuggled books past the thought police. It sponsored conferences and small scholarships that enabled writers, artists, and other intellectuals from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, and the remaining East bloc countries—except Albania, which was completely closed off from the world—to travel to the West and, during month-long visits, experience something of life there for themselves.

Laborey managed the foundation from 1975. She traveled into the East bloc developing contacts. She took care of visiting scholarship recipients who came to the West and rolled up in front of her office near Henry Miller's old haunts on the Boulevard Beaumarchais. She perfected the art of explanation and developed the stamina to endure

East Germany, I could not avoid informers," Laborey said.

Laborey used émigrés in Paris to establish contacts in Romania, which was ruled at the time by Nicolae Ceausescu. The Securitate, Romania's secret police, stifled dissent with a vast network of informants and the power to punish people with beatings, jail, and the loss of jobs, even for family members. Laborey and her friends once ate her notes after a suspicious phone call rang in the artist's studio where they were meeting.

"I met [Eugene] Ionescu, but did not work with him, even though the Securitate said I had. One of my great contacts was Andrej Plesu," said Laborey. "He was in Germany on a scholarship and later in internal exile."

During the 1980s, the foundation helped Istvan Eorsi, a Hungarian playwright and poet, to obtain a placement at a university in Cleveland, Ohio. During the visit, Eorsi used his time to drive to other parts of America—so much so that the university complained. Eorsi's

“The game is over. It may last years, but it is over. Everything is going to change.”

smoke-filled nights and days and nights of vodka-fueled conversation. The vast majority of scholars were not hard-line anticommunists or people desperate to defect. They were, rather, young people who had gifted minds and who would, after exposure to the dizzying choices available in Western supermarkets and libraries, carry home a world view that no longer squared with the warped image of the West officially propagated in their own countries.

"It was a lot about partying and trying to be normal under very abnormal circumstances," Laborey said. "I got a lot of credit for my capacity to drink vodka from morning to night."

Laborey began her career after graduating from the Sorbonne. Political dissent was growing in Eastern Europe, with individuals and groups in Poland and Czechoslovakia as the leading insurgents. The Helsinki Accords were signed. Charter 77 arose. A dockworkers strike in Gdansk set in motion a chain of events that made Solidarity a household word all around the globe.

One of the foundation's board members, an expatriate Polish intellectual named Konstanty Jelenski, had been involved in the Congress for Cultural Freedom. "Through him I had the best contacts in Poland," Laborey said. One of the first was the historian Adam Michnik. "I met Michnik first in Paris, where he had been invited personally by Sartre. He came when I first started and began talking about Watergate. He was a star. Brilliant and fearless."

In Czechoslovakia, the police followed the 1968 Soviet invasion by breaking up most of the country's intellectual circles. Still, Laborey visited Prague and other towns and cities in Czechoslovakia. Once a Czech historian asked her to bring a specific book, Volume 3 from an important German historical encyclopedia. It had disappeared from every set in all of Czechoslovakia. "I wasn't caught," Laborey said. "I got to his kitchen and, when he saw that book, he literally cried."

East Germany, the East bloc's security and military lynchpin, was even more difficult to crack. "Even the East German opposition believed in the system, that the system was good, but badly applied. In

wanderings proved to be a boon for the foundation. During one trip to New York, he visited an old schoolmate, an émigré from Hungary he had not seen in years. He told his friend about Laborey, and later told Laborey about his friend, George Soros.

Laborey eventually met Soros in 1981 and started to discuss financial support for the foundation. When Soros asked how much she needed, Laborey recalled responding, "\$10,000."

Soros answered, "Well, Annette, think larger."

No more did Laborey have to spend time raising funds. Soros was willing to match the funding that the foundation had been receiving from the Ford Foundation. Laborey now had new resources to expand her work into the Baltic republics and Bulgaria. Through Laborey's connections, Soros gained collaborators in Eastern Europe.

In 25 years, the Foundation for Mutual Support Among Europe's Intellectuals helped nearly 3,000 intellectuals to make visits to the West. The foundation delivered 15,000 books to Eastern countries, including one Volume 3 from a German encyclopedia.

In 1991, Laborey made a final journey from Paris to Poland for the foundation. This time she carried a cache of expensive French cheese to serve at a victory party in Krakow, a three-day-bash for a hundred members of the network she had nurtured during her years on the road. Members of Laborey's network had become leaders of their countries' new political establishment. Network alumnus Andrej Plesu, now Romania's minister of culture and a future foreign minister, was a guest. Two other guests were advisers to President Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia. Another had become Czechoslovakia's vice-minister of foreign affairs. One was president of Hungary Television. Four others were members of their national parliaments.

One of the speakers, Leszek Kolakowski, the renowned professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, proposed that the statues of Lenin and other monuments of communism have only their heads removed. He said they should be replaced by the smiling face of Annette Laborey.



The Return to Europe— By Way of EU Membership

Billboard urging people in Poland to vote yes in the European Union accession referendum, 2004.

Heather Grabbe, director of OSI–Brussels since February 2009, worked most recently as senior advisor to the European commissioner for enlargement. Here she describes how the EU accession process helped candidate countries turn into more stable democracies—with a push from the Open Society Institute and the Soros foundations on the ground.

HEATHER GRABBE

LOOKING BACK UPON THE TRANSITION process in Central and Eastern Europe raises two significant questions for the European Union: First, how much impact did the European Union have on the transitions to democracy in the region? And second, five years after the historic accession of eight former communist countries to the European Union, how strongly do the new and old member states share “European values”?

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, joining the European Union and NATO was seen as crucial for ending the divide between Western and Eastern Europe. EU membership, as the late Polish foreign minister Bronislaw Geremek often said, would allow former communist countries to take their rightful place in Europe. Former Czech president Vaclav Havel described joining NATO as a crucial way of ending the lingering and simplistic prejudices that he described as “West good” and “East bad.” Leaders and citizens in Central and Eastern Europe saw EU membership as offering the prospect of belonging to a club of powerful states and acquiring equal rights with the rich

countries of Europe. The painful separation from the rest of Europe described by Milan Kundera in his famous essay “The Kidnapped East” was over. No longer did Central and Eastern Europeans feel like the poor relations denied the passports, money, and opportunities enjoyed by their Western counterparts.

The hope of many was that EU enlargement would erase the political traces of the Iron Curtain. The first five years of membership have fulfilled some of these expectations. On the whole, the 27 member states of the European Union share a general preference for democratic and pluralist politics; economies that are integrated into global markets; strong social welfare systems; and relatively tolerant and open societies. They display considerable variation in their national positions, of course, but there is no sharp division between old and new members as predicted by former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Only on policy toward the East is there a marked difference, with several new members much more hawkish on Russia than are Germany and Italy, for example, and with most of the new members favoring a more open

Voices from Transition

HELENA LUCZYWO

Poland

Recently retired deputy editor-in-chief at
Gazeta Wyborcza

BEFORE

I had been involved in the democratic opposition since I was a student in the 1960s. Poland was freer than the other Soviet bloc countries. Yet, there was much fear and doublespeak. The questions people faced were how to make sense of life, how to do something useful and not to lose dignity and decency in a system based on deception.

In the 1980s, after the imposition of martial law, we were completely immersed in our underground tasks: looking for new apartments where we could live, work, and hide Solidarity leaders, collecting information, and editing, publishing, and distributing our *Solidarity* weekly.

An article in *Rolling Stone* magazine I read a long time ago described communist Poland like a U.S. post office: gray, boring, people reduced to humble supplicants waiting in endless lines. There was something to this. Even though life in Poland was never boring for me, there was little color and there were constant shortages of everything. My brother said to me once about some goods sent from abroad: “This smells of the West!”

AFTER

Life is much better now. There is more freedom, democracy, and economic growth. Life also seems to have more color. The country is independent, has had several consecutive governments that have peacefully passed power after losing elections, the judiciary is on its own, the market operates, the media is free, and civil rights are largely respected. For me, the accession of Poland and other Central European countries to NATO and the EU was kind of a second miracle after the revolution of 1989. It is the great accomplishment of my generation, and I’m glad to have contributed to it. I’m glad for smaller things as well. If I go to Italy, no one checks my ID any longer at the airport.

The worst change has been the mass unemployment that came with the market. Many factory workers, our colleagues who were the strength of Solidarity and largely contributed to our freedom, lost their jobs. I keep thinking: “Could we have done something to avoid this?” Then there was the first presidential election in 1990, when anti-Semitism and primitive populist demagoguery were used to smear the campaign of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a noncommunist Catholic intellectual who lost in the first round. Finally, the war in Yugoslavia.

Recent victories for democracy are one source of hope for me: in 2007, young people in Poland—either kids or just born in 1989!—voted to end the nationalist Law and Justice Party’s control of parliament. In the United States, there is Barack Obama’s story; in Ukraine, the orange revolution. Democracy is fragile—easily endangered by the Putins and Berlusconi of this world—we need some evidence to prove it still works.



EU approach to the possibility of future membership for Ukraine and other eastern neighbors.

There is no doubt that the prospect of joining the European Union drove major reforms and influenced many key political choices during transition. In pursuit of membership, governments in candidate countries used EU technical and financial assistance to incorporate large amounts of legislation from the European Union and strengthen their state administration to implement and enforce the new laws. EU guidance shaped many of the public institutions which are now central to upholding democracy and keeping societies open—from electoral commissions to independent and accountable judiciaries.

The accession process also created new roles and opportunities for the European Union and nongovernmental organizations such as the Open Society Institute and its network of foundations. The

However, when the countries approached membership, EU funding for social inclusion objectives helped governments start spending money on marginalized groups, most notably the Roma, which they would otherwise have neglected.

The second question—how established have “EU values” become in postcommunist Europe?—is difficult to measure. EU values tend to be very general, such as “liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law”—and it’s hard to separate intended transfers from the socialization effects of officials meeting their EU counterparts regularly, taking on their EU ways of speaking and behaving. Officials and politicians quickly learned what was and was not politically correct in EU debates—for example, on treatment of the Roma, asylum seekers, and criminalization of homosexuality.

Overall, the European Union’s major contribution to democratic

“The EU accession process was highly effective in improving standards of governance and observance of rights; indeed, Italy and some other old members might now find it difficult to meet the conditions for membership.”

European Union had much wider influence in the political and economic development of postcommunist Europe than it ever did on the politics and economies of the first 15 member states. The formal “competences” (legal powers) of the European Commission are very limited in areas such as education, culture, health, human rights, and minority protection—as member states prefer to decide these issues domestically. But because the conditions for membership were much more wide-ranging for postcommunist Europe than EU policies for the existing member states, the commission had to develop the expertise to assess the quality of democracy for the first time. In practice, this meant the commission often relied on the assessments of NGOs such as the Soros foundations and our grantees, and still does so for the Balkans and Turkey.

The Soros foundations in candidate countries also used EU membership as leverage to advocate for reforms that opened societies. As the European Union pushed for improving standards of democracy, governance, and rights from above, OSI worked from below by making concrete proposals to governments about how to achieve the goals set by the European Union.

To the frustration of many in the region, the European Union provided no answers to some of the most painful issues in the transition, such as lustration laws that would limit the political participation of members or collaborators from the previous regime, and access to police files kept on individuals—because its original member states never wanted a European-level policy on such sensitive domestic issues. The European Union also provided little guidance on how to help vulnerable groups who had lost the most in the economic reforms—the old, the unemployed, and those living in the countryside. In the 1990s, the European Union’s policy advice to the wannabe members was much more liberal than the economic policies practiced by its member states, focusing on macroeconomic reforms and private sector development, but paying little attention to social welfare systems.

transition was to provide an anchor for the process that kept it going during difficult times and across changes of government. The accession process was a framework which gave governments a sense of direction and motivated them, even when the European Union had no precise solution to propose. It was highly effective in improving standards of governance and observance of rights; indeed, Italy and some other old members might now find it difficult to meet the conditions for membership whereas new members like Hungary and Estonia clearly met the standards.

For postcommunist societies, the importance of the accession process lay not in the technical requirements for membership and the meetings of officials, but in the parallel growth of contacts between people—the organic integration of economies and societies across the former divide. The road to EU membership provided fantastic new opportunities, especially for the young and those who wanted to travel and work abroad. Possibilities that had been unthinkable under communism arrived year after year: visa regimes were progressively lifted, scholarship programs opened up, entrepreneurs and businesses large and small developed relationships that put new products on store shelves, and foreign direct investment brought completely new kinds of jobs.

The magic of joining the European Union lies in this double opening up of societies—that the European Union was pressing governments to introduce better policies and institutions, while at the same time ordinary citizens were meeting their fellow Europeans in universities, companies, schools, and parliaments. In doing so, they found that their values, interests, and concerns had not diverged that much during the half-century of division.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about EU accession, go to www.ec.europa.eu/enlargement. For continuous coverage of issues and developments in the transition process, go to www.tol.cz



Seeking Paradise, Finding Europe

A woman ascends a stairway in Romania, 2006.

In an excerpt from a forthcoming follow up to her collection of political essays *Cafe Europa*, Slavenka Drakulic reflects on how communism's collapse has brought more choices for toothpaste as well as a slower, more difficult change in consciousness from the collective "we" to the individual "I" with all its civic responsibilities.

SLAVENKA DRAKULIC

WHEN I TAKE A LOOK AT MY OWN BATHROOM, although Croatia is not yet a member of the EU, I feel that we belong to Europe. That is, we are almost there as I can see from the detergent boxes of Ariel and Omo, of Persil and Woolite. And just as Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk feels about his bathroom, I too am very hopeful, because I am addressed in my local language on their boxes. I marvel at the fact that Croatia and my language are recognized on the global market, at least in instructions for use of a detergent. After all, does the market not come before politics? Some even say that it decides politics.

Actually, I enjoy the look of my bathroom today because I am old enough to remember the bathroom in my parent's apartment in the early 1950s, when there was only "Plavi radion" washing powder. Or even an earlier bathroom with no washing powder whatsoever, only a bar of "Jelen" soap. There was so little of cosmetics or even hygienic products in my childhood that the brand name of the only existing toothpaste, which came in two flavors, strawberry and mint, was simply—toothpaste. That is, the product itself was the brand, something unimaginable today. Since I am a woman, my bathroom stores more than detergent; it contains all sorts of creams and shower gels, oils and hair products that I waited a long time to be able to buy in shops in Zagreb, instead of in Graz or Trieste or some other Western city.

However, what I am nowadays especially glad to have is my stack of fine toilet paper. Rolls and rolls of it, I still squirrel them away as if they are going to disappear from the supermarket shelf at any moment, as they used to do before. Old habits die hard! Does anybody in Eastern Europe today remember that toilet paper was a luxury not so long ago? I guess my generation is the last one to remember, and when we are gone it will be entirely forgotten. People born after, say 1985, will ask in bewilderment: There was no toilet paper? But that is simply impossible! How could you live without it?

Well, indeed, how could we?

The role of toilet paper in the downfall of communism is quite a particular one. I do not mean fine toilet paper like the kind I now have in my bathroom, what I mean is just any toilet paper, any at all. The lack of this product became for me a symbol for the changes that our communist society went through during the last two decades—a clear indication that communism, as a political and economic system, did not function. A system that could not recognize and fulfill the basic needs of people, ranging from toilet paper all the way to human rights, was bound to collapse. And though, in retrospect, that was obvious, nobody dared to expect it would happen so soon.

If a bathroom is a metaphor, then we can safely assume our dream

was to have one like Nicolai Ceausescu's daughter Zoe had in Bucharest, not necessarily with golden taps or pink toilet seats, but just with an abundance of warm water and toilet paper. Because in former times, even a normal bathroom was a luxury, reserved only for the members of the nomenklatura.

But who is this “we,” which—every time I use it—sounds like some mythical entity, some nonexistent collective body, a ghost? Indeed, this pronoun indicating the plural, a collective, is a key to understanding many things connected with former communist countries and people's behavior there, as well as our dreams and expectations.

The question is, of course, what did we get instead of the normality that we confused with paradise?

The normality we got after the collapse of communism was something rather different than what we had expected. The change from a totalitarian political system into a democratic one, from a planned economy into (wild) capitalism, did not automatically create a better life for all.

But what hurts the most is the enormous gap between a few rich and the majority poor. It is easy to forget that egalitarianism was perhaps the most appealing part of the communist religion.

“A system that could not recognize and fulfill the basic needs of people, ranging from toilet paper all the way to human rights, was bound to collapse.”

No, it is not a ghost. To me, growing up in Yugoslavia, a so-called communist (or socialist) country, one which was not as miserable as the countries in the Soviet bloc (but which became much more miserable later on when Yugoslavia was falling apart in a bloody war while all the others were escaping communism), this “we” is neither a mere figure of speech nor an abstraction. It is a key word. It is the summary of my experience during my former life. I am using it on purpose, just like comrade Tito, comrade Ceausescu, or any other important comrade did, when addressing the people—although for a completely different reason. To me it reveals the collective spirit we grew up in, when citizens were treated like one single body. At school and at work, in public life and in politics, people did not exist in any other grammatical form. Every exposure of an “I” was punished because, it goes without saying, individualism starts with opposing collectivism.

Therefore, I am using this pronoun to indicate our common denominator, the very similar experience people had in the past, while living under communism. The consequences of the political use of this form of grammar were devastating, and still are. We still see ourselves as a group, as a nation, sometimes even as a tribe. Not yet as individuals. It is hard to start to act as “I” because with our background it is hard to believe that an individual opinion, initiative, or vote could make a difference. To hide behind “we” is still safer. Besides, to be an individual being means to be individually responsible and that also requires learning. That is, time.

It is not only our communist past that still keeps us prisoners of a collective pronoun, but also our dream to get out of that prison. We nurtured a collective dream of escaping from our everyday living. We were dreaming about a different normality, about different bathrooms.

But the problem is that we expected nothing less than paradise. Compared with what we had, West Europeans had such an abundance that it seemed to us like one.

And so, the big confusion occurred: the West European normality that seemed so beautiful, but so impossible to get, was mistaken for paradise itself, even if we called it simply Europe. Our belief in a consumer's paradise easily replaced the official communist faith.

Soon, not only our old dreams collapsed, but most of the new promises failed us as well. With the old system, the old social welfare net, as feeble as it was, disappeared, too. There were no workers' unions to protect our rights, no welfare state, no good and decent laws that are respected, no social network that would help—and no clear awareness about the need for it all, or not yet.

Confronted with such immense changes, deceived and disappointed in their new circumstances, many started to feel like victims. Some political leaders quickly identified their anxiety and fear as a “crisis of national identity.” Fear usually means closing up, defending what you have, or think you have, what you have not yet lost.

Frustrated and bitter, lonely and afraid, people took refuge in the lap of the Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim or any other religious haven. And they went for the populist rhetoric of nationalist leaders who did not have much to offer, but at least offered someone or something to blame: globalization, hedonism, decadence, capitalism, corruption, democracy, old communists, new oligarchs, the financial collapse of the West, neighbors, Gypsies . . . it didn't really matter who or what.

Was normality, as we imagined and desired it, simply a mistake? Yes and no. We are learning the hard way that this normality—that is, a comfortable life—doesn't come automatically and, above all, it doesn't come cheap.

Now we are experiencing that normality has another dimension, a tedious, small-scale struggle for each of us. Far from golden taps and pink toilet seats, the color of normality is gray. This is bad news. And there is no end to the struggle, be it for Zoe's bathroom, for justice, for more freedom—or against corruption, manipulation, or fear. The good news, however, is that each of us individually can do it, can struggle and change. Or, at least, one must try. None of us should blame anybody else any longer.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Slavenka Drakulic's other collections of political writings include *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*. To read more about culture and politics by authors from East and West, go to www.eurozine.com



Was there a 1989?

How dramatic were the changes that took place across Central and Eastern Europe in 1989? Istvan Rev, director of the Open Society Archives in Budapest, offers an analysis of this question and describes how the archives works to bring the enduring events and issues from the communist era and the transition to the public.

ISTVAN REV

EXCEPT PERHAPS FOR THE FRENCH DEMOGRAPHER Emmanuel Todd, barely anybody was able to foresee in a credible way that the fall of the Berlin Wall was coming. Back in 1989, many felt for sure that they were witnesses to historic changes. In the light of the consequences and the lost illusions, however, many people in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe are having second thoughts: in 2009, the general feeling is that even if there had been a revolution, it was stolen.

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia, is not even worth glancing at,” maintained Oscar Wilde in his essay “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” But the map of the world in 1989 did not include Utopia; as if with the withering away of the soul of man under decades of socialism, Utopia had disappeared from the list of desired destinations. Nobody was ready for another adventure.

The ideological and intellectual desert of 1989 proved to be a suitable landscape for unexpected and fertile changes. Had the fall (of the Berlin Wall, of communism) taken place some 20 years earlier, around 1968–69—a time when the world was ripe with a wide variety of thinkers and groups all feverishly advancing their different utopias—there would have been no chance for quick agreement at the roundtables in Warsaw, Budapest, or Prague. Twenty years later, after long decades of catastrophic social and economic experiments, most people, including the intellectuals, who acted as spokespersons for the yet unrepresented majority, opted for normalcy, not experimentation. They pursued self-constrained, peaceful transitions that had a minimum of retroactive justice, and they adopted tested institutions, processes, and techniques of power imported from the West. The ambition of Central Europe was not to remain different from the West, but to join NATO and the European Union as soon as possible, to prove to the world and to themselves that they had always been part of Europe.

The transition also provided opportunities for the extreme right. Before 1989, communists presented the history of the 20th century as the saga of a constant fight between anticommunist fascists and antifascist communists. In this official understanding, any form

Russian cellist and composer Mstislav Rostropovich, who fought for artistic freedom in the Soviet Union, performs next to the Berlin Wall, November 1989.

Voices from Transition

QEMAL BUDLLA Albania

Driver and staff member, Open Society Foundation for Albania

BEFORE

In the 1980s, the economy really collapsed. All the shops were empty. There were lines for milk. There was no fruit, meat, anything. There was also absolutely no freedom of speech or expression. You had to think twice about everything you said, even if you whispered. If it sounded ambiguous or suspicious, you could face consequences. There were also party members who would roam around factories and offices all day while people worked. If they saw conduct, clothing, haircuts—anything that seemed like foreign influence or “propaganda,” anything that did not reflect “educated” behavior—they would quickly write it down and keep it as information that could be used against you.

In order to watch Western or Yugoslavian TV channels, Albanians invented the “tin”—a tin plate fashioned into a quadratic shape that had a bobbin as a kind of antenna to receive channels. Albanian state broadcasting ended every night at 10:30 with a final news program. After that, anything your TV might pick up with the tin came from stations abroad, but you had to be very careful and close the curtains. If the glow of the TV was visible, suspicions would arise.

AFTER

Most Albanians were very pleased when the Berlin Wall came down, but in Albania the first bricks began to fall with the death of the dictator Enver Hoxha in 1985. People started to have more open conversations with more people. We didn't know what was going to happen or what the best solutions might be, but at least we started to talk to one another.

For me, three of the most important changes would be free speech, freedom of movement, and the fact that there was no longer a lack of food. You can say what you want without worrying about spies. There are more opportunities to get a car or take transportation and travel where you want. Food is available and we have fruit in every season. In the 1980s, a shop managed to get some bananas, and the crowd rushing in to buy them broke the window. The bananas weren't even yellow and didn't taste good.

Public safety is a different matter. Before the 1990s, people, particularly women and children, were not victims of harassment, abduction or murder. It used to be very safe for everybody.

Corruption in health care is a big problem. You have to pay out of your own pocket for services, despite the fact that hospitals are public. Before, services were better, but there was a lack of many medicines. Now there are more medicines, but the services leave much to be desired.

A sign that the transition is ending will be when visa policies for Albanians are liberalized. Visa requirements by other countries continue to prevent many Albanians from seeing what life is like beyond our borders. It has been many years since the transition began and people feel we've become stuck. The recent elections give me hope because they were freer and more democratic than previous ones.



of anticommunism equaled fascism; there was no room for either noncommunist opposition to fascism or democratic opposition to communism. With the changes in 1989, it became relatively simple for radical, anti-Semitic, and racist right-wing groups to use their suppression by communist governments and their anticommunist roots to present themselves as acceptable participants in the new political scene.

The economic crisis in 2008 has given right-wing and nationalist groups new opportunities to undermine the achievements of the political transition. Using inflammatory, populist rhetoric, these groups are finding political success by blaming “imported” democratic Western institutions, the logic of the market, liberal politics, and the “nonexperimental” nature of the transition for all the fiscal and economic troubles.

The rise and strength of the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe, the emerging populism, anti-Semitism, racism, and intolerance, are paradoxically and intimately connected to the largely nonviolent, negotiated nature of the arrival of postcommunism in 1989. The negotiating communists never had democratic authorization, while those who negotiated in the name of the new emerging anticommunist organizations had not yet attained legitimacy through democratic elections. As the high hopes for the transition could not be met, there are now people and groups on the right who are finding it easy to question retrospectively the legitimacy and authorization of those who negotiated the transition—to accuse them of secret deals behind the backs of unsuspecting citizens who were robbed of the chance for a real revolution.

“Was there a 1989?” is not meant as a commemoration. OSA is not just an archive but an institution of memory, and it turns the archive inside out by developing dynamic and creative ways of presenting its resources to the general public—to those who otherwise would never come to an archive. Along with helping people form broad views and analyses of the transition, “Was there a 1989?” and other OSA materials work to highlight specific details of the Cold War such as the epic propaganda battles between East and West.

By reading and listening to OSA’s collection of tapescripts and broadcasts from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty—the most important propaganda machine of the Cold War—people can get a deep sense of how governments in the West responded to the national radio programs of the communist countries and used radio to reach audiences behind the Iron Curtain. Every day, people at the headquarters of Radio Free Europe in Munich listened to and recorded the programs coming from Bucharest, Moscow, Warsaw, and other Central and Eastern European capitals. During the night, dozens of typists summarized the tape recordings and prepared transcripts with a short English summary and almost verbatim description in local languages. By early morning, the transcripts were sent as telegrams to the U.S. State Department and the CIA in Washington, which, in turn instructed Radio Free Europe and the Russian-language Radio Liberty on how to respond. At the same time, in the communist capitals, the ministries of interior and the secret police agencies jammed the programs coming from Munich, but always left one waveband open, so they too could have technicians and typists record and transcribe the broadcasts. These summaries of the so-called “enemy radio programs” were then sent to officials in the ministries

“In 1989, after long decades of catastrophic social and economic experiments, most people opted for normalcy, not experimentation.”

The price the former communist part of the world has paid for the unparalleled achievement of the peaceful collapse of the Soviet empire is a growing public distrust of democratic processes, and a strengthening of groups that actively oppose the kind of democratic changes that had been hoped for in 1989.

The events and decisions of 1989 and their consequences continue to have an impact on society and how people perceive the transition 20 years later. To help people access first-hand, authentic information and gain new perspectives, the Open Society Archives at Central European University developed the “Was there a 1989?” project. “Was there a 1989?” is a web-based collection of mostly Hungarian-language materials and also English and Russian language materials from both Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other sources. The project provides access to special, until now unknown documents and helps organize public events that promote non-partisan, rational public dialogue on the lost and fulfilled opportunities of the transition—one of the most notable and unforeseen events of the tumultuous history of the 20th century.

and at the propaganda department of the central committee of the local communist party. The propaganda department in turn instructed the national radios on how to respond to the Western propaganda.

In this way a constant dialogue unfolded over the airwaves: the unsuspecting audiences in the communist countries were not aware of the fact that while following the programs of either the national radios or Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, they listened to just one part of the dialogue of the opposing propaganda on the two sides of the Cold War divide. Communism—or its representation at least—was a joint project.

Whether it is revealing the details of the Cold War’s propaganda battles or asking people to reflect on the events of 1989, the Open Society Archives is committed to helping people explore how Europe’s recent past continues to influence its present and its future.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about the Open Society Archives and the “Was there a 1989?” project, go to www.osaarchivum.org

Human Rights in Russia: The Struggle Continues

Since the late 1960s, Sergei Kovalev has been a leading proponent for human rights in Russia, spending time in jail in the 1970s for challenging the communist government and then, after the collapse of communism, helping establish the Russian human rights group Memorial and the Moscow branch of Amnesty International. Kovalev resigned as Russia's presidential human rights commissioner in 1996, and publicly condemned then President Boris Yeltsin for abandoning human rights and democratic principles. Kovalev spoke with OSI staff member Olga Tarasov about human rights in Russia before and after the Soviet Union crumbled.

How did you start your human rights career?

Sergei Kovalev (SK): In high school I became interested in law and history. Yet somehow I wound up studying in the medical institute and then at the university studying in the department of biology. I took up natural sciences because I felt if I became a lawyer or historian, I would be forced to “prostitute” myself to the Soviet system, and I did not want that.

My first involvement with public issues came at the university. A friend and I wrote a letter to our professors, the draft of which was liked by the rest [of the students] and signatures began to gather under it. The point of the letter was very simple. We noted that we were still young students, but were nonetheless learning to be scientists and how

could science exist under conditions that did not guarantee freedom of thought and freedom of opinion? We pointed out that our professors criticized formal genetics but didn't explain why. We concluded by stating that a scientist can be nurtured only by unhampered access to all information and by freely comparing different points of view. Today this letter would be considered very careful, even timid, but at the time it had the effect of an exploding bomb. The majority of signatories rescinded their signatures, but I and a few other stubborn individuals held firm. After a tense meeting, my friends advised me to avoid certain expulsion from the ranks of the Young Communists [Komsomol] and to resign due to exceeding the age requirements.

My entrée into more general issues, issues of democracy and politics, began when I coauthored a letter regarding the trial of Sinyavsky and

Police arrest a human rights activist during a rally in Moscow, 2006.



“We fought for the right to self-respect and some of us were ready to pay for this right with imprisonment.”

Daniel, writers accused of using pseudonyms to write anti-Soviet editorials in foreign journals. This was a short letter to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Then, the [1968] trial of the protestors on Red Square really helped galvanize the dissident movement.

How would you describe the evolution of the human rights movement in Russia over the last 20 years? Has the movement been a success? What are some of the lessons learned?

SK: We have to look prior to 1989 because the dissident movement from the 1960s to 1980s was never a political opposition movement. We did not envision it as a political struggle. For us, the driving motive was shame. We were ashamed to see what we saw around us and to remain indifferent. We fought for the right to self-respect and it turned out that there were even some of us who were ready to pay for this right with imprisonment. It was a moral movement, not a political one. We were creating what has come to be called new political thinking. We were creating political idealism. This was the central point of the dissident movement from the 1960s to 1980s.

When perestroika began in the 1980s, a significant number of the old dissidents simply went off in various directions. What then emerged as a human rights movement in the Russian Federation is not the same as what existed before. Today's powerful human rights movement in Russia is different in its essence, composition, personalities, and in some sense, in its ideas and spheres of work. Ironically, many in Russian society see it as having little value. The new human rights movement is viewed by a large segment of the public and by many powerful officials as negative and antipatriotic. Russia's contemporary human rights community has many organizations that are very practical, successful, and have accomplished a lot. And unlike the work of the dissidents in the past, a fair amount of these groups' activities require some degree of cooperation with the government.

In the past, we, as dissidents, did not see ourselves as politicians. We recognized and understood the futility of organizing a political struggle against the communist state. However, we did not hide the fact that we had an interest in the state's life, in the constitutional norms of the country in which we lived. But today if you want to help refugees or someone else in need, it is unwise to become too interested in questions about the government's role or responsibility for protecting human rights. A majority of human rights activists in the country do not question who is the master of the house—society or the authorities—and whether Russia's people are truly the only source of authority. To ask questions like these is now considered political extremism with all the negative consequences. For some it may be legal prosecution, for others it may be a bullet to the back of the head.

Today's human rights movement works on very important yet practical problems. It makes great efforts to demonstrate the fact that it is apolitical in nature. The movement will raise grievances to a limited extent about the actions of the authorities, for example, in Chechnya or in the North Caucasus, but it categorically refuses to

question or challenge a host of wider political issues. For example, we can count on one hand the groups in today's human rights movement who ask about what has happened to free elections in Russia. No one speaks out about how we are not at all a federation; that there is no administration of justice; that independent judicial authority and, in general, the separation of powers has never developed despite what the constitution declares. It is very regrettable. Human rights advocates should be involved in politics by demanding genuine implementation of basic, universal values.

Is the Russian human rights movement in crisis, almost two decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union?

SK: To a great degree the human rights movement has become focused on paying attention to private interests, private manifestations of the law. This is necessary but totally insufficient. The international community and human rights movement are experiencing a crisis. This crisis is a moral crisis. Within the Russian human rights movement the crisis is based in the inconstancy of the belief that we, as human rights advocates, are not politicians and that we are indifferent to politics. This is incorrect, yet this apolitical existence has been forced upon human rights defenders through intimidation and violence. Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency after Boris Yeltsin's resignation in December 1999 has been a tragedy for human rights in Russia.

Is Russia pursuing its own, unique path to democracy? Or is this simply a facade to hide the true nature of the government?

SK: Democracy does not tolerate adjectives. If it's qualified as a “managed” or “sovereign” democracy, it is not a democracy. So, yes, it is a facade. There is an appearance of democracy because Russia now has many political parties. But the actual results of elections are largely dictated by the authorities.

Will things improve in the next 5 to 10 years? Is Russia going in the right direction, despite a few stumbling blocks along the way?

SK: I remain an optimist, except my optimism will probably have to be confirmed in 15 years, not now. I've noticed that I keep on repeating this. Ten years have passed and I am still repeating 15, when I should actually be saying 5 years. Nonetheless, my optimism is based on the political evolution of the world, not Russia. I see the world evolving politically first, and then transferring or imposing the gains to Russia. This is because the problems we face are global problems. Andrei Sakharov said, “My country needs support and pressure.” In reality, Russia has received little of either of these from the international community. The world needs to direct more pressure at the government to respect and enforce human rights. And the world needs to provide more support for Russian civil society to protect rights and promote democracy.



A young woman in Lithuania sits on a toppled statue of Vladimir Lenin, 1991.

Less Repression, **More Rights**— and More Still to Do

Writing about the work of the Open Society Institute and the Soros foundations since the fall of the Berlin Wall, OSI President Aryeh Neier points to the progress many countries have made in securing a range of important rights but warns of significant challenges that remain.

ARYEH NEIER

FOR A DOZEN YEARS OR SO in the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, most of the efforts of the Soros foundations network were focused on the former communist countries of what had been the Soviet bloc. While we have extended our work in recent years to all parts of the globe, we still spend a larger share of our resources in

what we refer to as “the traditional region” than elsewhere. The results in promoting the rule of law and human rights have been mixed.

With the exception of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, no part of the former Soviet bloc today is as repressive as in Soviet times. Everywhere else, to a greater or lesser degree, it is possible to express and publish

Voices from Transition

ANA PASCARU

Moldova

Philosopher and university professor whose activities, like those of many researchers in the former Soviet Union, were monitored and restricted by communist governments. Currently head of the philosophy department at the Institute of History, State, and Law at the Academy of Sciences of Moldova.

BEFORE

I completed my doctoral studies in Moscow and returned to Moldova. The environment in Moldova was much stricter than in Moscow. The authorities were very tough with me and most other researchers. They monitored our work and required us to introduce quotes from Marx, Lenin, and other party leaders. My saddest memory is of the lack of access to alternative sources of information from outside the Soviet Union. I remember a meeting of young philosophers from socialist states held in Chisinau at the beginning of 1980s during which my discussions with young people from Poland were closely “followed” by covert operatives. As a result I was not allowed to visit any other countries until 1989.

In 1988 I became interested in an emerging democratic and national revival movement in Moldova. Meetings held by democratic groups convinced me that it was possible to return to our national values after 50 years of communism. The fall of the Berlin Wall a year later and other events in the USSR proved to me the weaknesses of the Soviet empire.

AFTER

My life has changed considerably. I can express my ideas and not keep them to myself. Now, my work depends only on my efforts and how I use opportunities to access information or share it with colleagues. I have more freedom to choose and pursue research and issues that are interesting to me.

My activities have gone from simple participation in meetings to addressing crucial issues facing Moldovan society. Over the last decade, I have collaborated with OSI’s East East: Partnership beyond Borders Program as an expert and organizer for projects that address important open society issues and overcome the totalitarian past. The program is one of the few opportunities in Moldova for me to pursue professional development and interact with other experts.

In 2001, the largely unreformed Communist Party was elected to power and won reelection in 2005. The return of the communists was a shock to me and many other people who support democratic reform. The communists claimed to be committed to democratic reforms, but did little to implement them. The government’s policies did increase poverty, prompt excessive migration, and help promote consumerism based on remittances from Moldovans working abroad. The government also used tax and financial tools to influence and prosecute NGOs.

Many Moldovans feel elections held in 2009 were marked by fraud. People, especially young people, protested, unleashing a government crackdown. The civic engagement reassured me about our chances for a better future. If young people born after 1989 now experiencing hard times are willing to struggle for their future here, then adults like me should support them. We should stay strong and not allow the next generation to pay for the irresponsibility of those in power.



critical comments about the government. Except for the Central Asian countries, all countries in the region are subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, which regularly decides cases requiring governments such as Russia and Ukraine to pay damages or provide other redress to victims of human rights abuses.

The greatest headway by far has been made in the 10 former communist countries that have joined the European Union. Though a number of these countries have had nationalist and populist movements that are antagonistic to minorities, especially the Roma, the incentive of belonging to the European Union has been an important safeguard for rights.

One of the most important contributions of the Soros foundations in the region has been the development of the capacity to secure legal redress for rights violations. We have done so by supporting organizations, including groups that were launched at our initiative, and by training lawyers. In some important cases, we have also participated directly in litigation. Our grantmaking has been led by the Budapest-based Human Rights and Governance Grants Program. The New York-based Open Society Justice Initiative has engaged in litigation in the region.

Previously, litigation had only been a significant factor in rights protection in a handful of countries with common law traditions such as the United States, India, the United Kingdom, and South Africa (where the legal system has both common law and civil law roots). It had been virtually unknown in civil law countries where precedent does not play a crucial role and where positive law—that is, the law

framework for media independence and diversity, and defense of media against interference with free expression. Our Roma programs have included economic development, cultural programs, access to health care, community development, the protection of legal rights, and, above all, education. Our Public Health Program has addressed such questions as the rights of the mentally ill and the intellectually disabled, the rights and welfare of drug addicts and those suffering from HIV and AIDS and tuberculosis, and a range of issues involving sexual minorities.

Despite the significant advances in the protection of rights in most countries of the region in the past two decades, substantial challenges remain. Aside from the United States, which imprisons immense numbers of people for nonviolent drug crimes and has draconian sentencing laws, several of the former Soviet bloc countries have the highest rates of incarceration in the world. The struggle to promote equal protection of the law for the Roma minority has a long way to go. Xenophobic treatment of other minorities is pervasive in some countries in the region. Authoritarian regimes in such countries as Russia and Belarus broadly restrict rights; and, in Russia, there have also been assassinations of journalists, humanitarian workers, and human rights monitors without what appear to be good faith efforts to prosecute and punish those responsible. Plainly, a lot remains to be done in the next 20 years throughout the region to try to protect human rights. As has been the case up to now, the emphasis should be both on the development and support of institutional mechanisms

“The struggle to promote equal protection of the law for the Roma minority has a long way to go. Xenophobic treatment of other minorities is pervasive in some countries in the region. Authoritarian regimes in such countries as Russia and Belarus broadly restrict rights.”

as enacted by legislatures—is supreme. Today, however, through our support for legal capacity development in the region, and taking advantage of opportunities for litigation before constitutional courts and supranational bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice, rights litigation plays an important role in many civil law countries of the former Soviet bloc.

Several other programs of the Soros foundations network have played a part in the protection of human rights in the region. Three that particularly warrant citation are our Media Program, our Roma programs, and our Public Health Program.

At an early stage, the Media Program provided direct support for independent media in the region. More recently, its efforts have been largely limited to training programs, support for professional associations of journalists and editors, efforts to develop the legal

for rights protection and on the enhancement of the capacity of individuals to defend their own rights and the rights of others.

Only fragments of the Berlin Wall are still to be seen as physical reminders of an earlier era. So far as the spirit of the region is concerned, the situation is more complicated. Some of the impediments to the protection of rights are similar to those in the countries that were on the other side of the wall. Others are legacies of the Soviet system. The ongoing challenge for the Soros foundations network is to address the shortcomings of both varieties.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the Open Society Institute's work, go to www.soros.org. For the story of Aryeh Neier's lifetime of fighting for civil liberties and human rights, see his book *Taking Liberties: Four Decades in the Struggle for Rights*.



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Tourists pose for pictures in front of a remaining section of the Berlin Wall, 2008.

