

Theme 6

Civic Institutions, Citizens' Participation

ERIC CHENOWETH

For this session, we have the luxury of four acute analysts of the situation of civil society in the region who have also participated as key actors in civil society's development. Our presenters are **Smaranda Enache**, the director of Liga Pro Europa based in Tirgu Mures, Romania, and **Miljenko Dereta**, the founder and director of Civic Initiatives in Belgrade, Serbia, from 1996 to 2011. After two years in parliament, Miljenko returned to Civic Initiatives in 2013 as a counselor. We also have two respondents: first is **Ales Bialiatski**, the long-time director of Viasna Human Rights Center from Belarus, recently released from prison, and second is **Maria Dubnova** from the Russian Federation, an independent Russian journalist. We have not specially noted Ales's presence here. It is perhaps a sign Ales has returned to normality that he is able to participate in our meetings. But I did want to welcome him back after more than 1,000 days in a hard-regime prison on fraudulent charges. We are most glad he is free to be here and speak with us. Maria Dubnova is a first-time participant in one of our events and to her we say welcome as well.

Presentation

25 Years of Civic Activism: Achievements and Failures The Case of Romania

by Smaranda Enache

I have been involved in almost all the important events in Romania in the last twenty-five years in various roles: as a civic leader, a political actor, a diplomat, a citizen, and an observer. My non-governmental organization, Liga Pro Europa, was a member of the Centers for Pluralism network, a unique initiative of IDEE in Washington, D.C. I hope that at some point people will recognize how unique it was. Thanks to IDEE and to our partners in the region, I had the opportunity to meet outstanding and influential political and civic personalities of all the post-communist countries, from Central Europe to Central-Asia, and to become acquainted with similarities and differences among our transitions. Due to IDEE's programs, some of us also had the opportunity to become familiar with the situation in current communist countries such as Cuba.

Drawing the balance of the last twenty-five years is a challenging task. It is difficult to formulate a diagnosis of a historical period when one is directly involved in the events. My approach is obviously subjective; it is more a testimony than an academic analysis.

It is also difficult to diagnose a historical period when it has not yet concluded. On the contrary, there are new and somehow unexpected and highly disturbing events adding constantly to this era. As we meet, Russia continues its military occupation of Crimea and blatantly supports secessionist movements in eastern Ukraine; it threatens the integrity of the Republic of Moldova; and it maintains the so-called frozen conflicts round the Black Sea area, such as Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Elsewhere, China continues to massively violate human rights; North Korea threatens the world with the use of nuclear weapons; and in Iraq and Syria, ISIS employs barbarian methods to impose a new Caliphate.

Closer to home, in both Western and Eastern Europe, we experience a new wave of extremism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism. And we see even democratically elected leaders, such as Prime Minister Victor Orbán in Hungary, praise the virtues of illiberal democracies, while Romania's Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, lists the merits of the Chinese Communist Party. During the Ukrainian crisis, both these leaders have barely criticized Russia for its unprecedented violation of international law and human rights. Overall, in the region, unprecedented levels of systemic corruption are undermining the principles of a free and sustainable economy.

None of these developments are new. Liberal democracy has not achieved universality nor have the values of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights been fully accepted. We can remember that it was during the bipolar period of the Cold War that a new theory emerged arguing that democratic principles were relative and should be implemented only in accordance with the "local culture" or political pragmatism. In fact, this approach was—and is—meant to deny the universality of human rights and freedoms and to "adapt" democracy to the interests of local political-religious and cultural elites of the non-democratic half of the world.

We thus convene here as actors and beneficiaries of a 25-year-period of transition from communism in the understanding that in this new historical environment our experience is of paramount importance. To continue the civic transformation of the post-totalitarian regimes, to guarantee the survival of pluralist democracies in the future, to overcome the variety of blatant challenges to liberal values, we need to reflect on the failures of the last twenty-five years in the region and to resume our unfinished business.

Turning to Romania, the first failure has been the regression in the public's support of and trust in democracy and freedom. You all know that Romania had one of the most repressive, Stalinist communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and also that its last leader, over twenty-five years, Nicolae Ceaușescu, added to it a strong nationalist element. The repression of freedoms and human rights was complete and before 1989 Romania did not have any genuine civil society. All organizations and associations that existed were created by the Communist Party.

The December 1989 Revolution was a popular, spontaneous, and anti-communist uprising. It started in the city of Timișoara with the arrest of a young Protestant pastor, László Tőkés. It spread quickly to all cities of Romania. Hundreds of thousands of citizens demonstrated throughout the country against communism and for democracy and freedom. People paid a high price for their freedom: more than 1,000 civilians were killed in attempts to repress this uprising. As this was happening, Ceaușescu tried to escape and was captured. Second-rank communist leaders and Securitate officials ordered his and his wife's execution on Christmas Day.

In December 1989, therefore, there were two distinct events happening: there was a genuine revolution, having certain results, and there was a *coup d'état* implemented by second-ranking communist party and Securitate leaders aiming at a counter-revolution and producing other results.

Twenty-five years later, opinion polls taken in September 2014 showed a dramatic weakening of support for democracy. Nicolae Ceaușescu is ranked highest among past Romanian presidents. An astonishing 60 percent of the population considers the country to be going in the wrong direction. Sixty-eight percent of Romanians think that there was more social justice before 1989. Sixty-five percent declare that their living standard was higher before 1989. Public trust in the Church and the Army is higher than in any democratically elected institutions, such as the parliament or the local administration.

One explanation for such public attitudes is the progressive weakening of the post-communist civil society that was built after December 1989. In the 1990s, Romania had around 3,000 active NGOs and hundreds of independent local radio stations and newspapers. Today, the number of active NGOs is less than 1,000 and independent local media has collapsed entirely. The most powerful private TV stations came under the ownership and control of former Securitate agents turned business moguls.

The First Phase: Civic Mobilization and Trust in Democracy

The most active civic groups emerged during and immediately after the December 1989 Revolution. These groups were organized by former

political prisoners and dissidents as well as by groups of individuals who opposed the communist regime in a variety of less public ways and hoped for a fast and effective transition from totalitarianism to democracy.

The most important civil society groups in this first phase were genuinely self-organized without any external support. Their priority was the dismantling of the communist regime, preventing former communists from regaining power, getting rid of repressive institutions, and reestablishing Romania in the community of free nations according to its pre-communist traditions. These groups had a clear ideological agenda with strategic goals and quickly found partners and developed relationships with democratic governments, institutions and NGOs in the Transatlantic Alliance.

The first generation of civic groups, however, acted in a highly hostile environment. State power had been confiscated by the second-rank communists together with the secret services. These forces replaced the Communist Party with the National Salvation Front, a political movement aimed at keeping power and manipulating and dominating Romanian politics and society. The NSF controlled the mass media, state resources, and the key institutions of government, including security and military services. Various methods were used to restore control of the communists and to divide the society, including harassing the leaders of the newly reestablished historical parties and destroying the offices of the Peasant Party, mobilizing popular militias to repress peaceful student demonstrations, using former Securitate agents to foment inter-ethnic conflicts in Transylvania between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority (as happened in my home town of Tîrgu Mureş), exercising control over media, among other methods. The violent repression of anti-communist protests culminated in the suppression of the Bucharest University Square student protest in June 1990.

These political forces also maintained Romania in a grey geo-strategic position: neither East nor West. In August 1991, Romania's President, Ion Iliescu, a former high ranking communist leader, signed a cooperation pact with the USSR, which, in its agony, was pressing Romania to be neutral and not to accede in any military pacts hostile to the USSR, meaning NATO. For the democratic forces, the pact was a clear indication that Ion Iliescu planned to keep Romania in the sphere of influence of the USSR against the clear aspirations of the Romanian nation.

The strong tendency towards communist restoration was opposed by a very strong and focused civil society, which had substantial support from a large part of the population as well as from the West. Civic groups such as the Timișoara Society, the Association of Former Political

Prisoners, the Students' League, the Civic Alliance, the Group for Social Dialogue, Liga Pro Europa, the Association for Interethnic Dialogue, and the Anti-Totalitarian Front of Cluj all cooperated with the leaders of the historical democratic parties—the Christian Democratic Peasant Party, the National Liberal Party, and the Social-Democratic Party—to adopt common strategies to resist the repressive and manipulative actions of the post-communist government led by Ion Iliescu.

For the 1996 elections, the civic groups succeeded in convincing the political parties to form a broad anti-communist alliance, the Democratic Convention of Romania, and put forward a unified opposition candidate, Emil Constantinescu, the highly respected rector of Bucharest University, for president. The Democratic Convention won both the parliamentary and presidential elections. After more than 50 years of dictatorship and a full six years after the December 1989 Revolution, Romania had its first non-communist government.

This first phase was a period of faith in democracy, optimism, trust in a better future, generosity, civic solidarity in the society at large, and unity in achieving goals, I remember these romantic times. We had organizational capacity throughout Romania, close cooperation with independent media, and our citizens were mobilized to vote for democratic change. I remember going from one village to another, sometimes clandestinely in order to avoid attention of the authorities, to identify local democratic leaders who could mobilize the voters and unify anti-communist forces.

Western support was crucial for the very existence of the civic groups. Small grants, distributed to a variety of credible and legitimate civic groups and independent media, allowed them to obtain equipment and publish materials on a large scale for disseminating ideas and values all over the country. Western support also meant trainings, seminars, and workshops to help civic groups and civic leaders enhance their organizational capabilities, develop human resources, multiply results, network, and disseminate good practices. IDEE in Washington, D.C. made a unique contribution to the development and consolidation of civic groups in Romania and in the other post-communist and post-Soviet countries not only by providing crucial support but also by setting up the largest civic network in the region, the Centers for Pluralism. The meetings and publications of the CFP were a unique resource for prominent civic leaders, democratic politicians, and independent journalists in Romania to cooperate with partners in the region and among themselves, to identify common needs and solutions, to mobilize for solidarity in cases of repression, and to organize for free and fair elections.

The Failures of the First Non-Communist Government

The November 1996 elections were a historic victory of Romania's civic movement over the post-communist forces. Indeed, this victory convinced the Western democracies that despite its Balkan roots, its totalitarian past, and its dominant Orthodox culture, Romania deserved the same chances for democracy as the other Central European and Baltic nations.

Civic groups, in close cooperation with Western partners as well as the democratic political parties, succeeded in neutralizing the offensives of the former communist structures against change, implementing deep reforms, and in achieving the strategic and historic goal of Romania's integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions. In 1999, Romania started negotiations for the accession to the European Union and NATO.

The 1996 victory, however, changed civil society in several ways. For one, many leaders of the civic organizations entered the government; I myself accepted a post as ambassador. It may or may not have been a mistake to do so, but what is also true in this period is that civil society groups started to repress their natural inclination to criticize the government's mistakes. We did not want to undermine the non-communist government in which we were participating in a very fragile political situation. So, we gave it uncritical support. Western donors were also encouraging civic groups to concentrate on sectoral or local issues, while the national groups divided among those favoring strong anti-communist policies like lustration and those encouraging a form of national reconciliation and a policy of forgetting the past. All of these factors eroded civil society's effectiveness and credibility.

Unfortunately, during the period of 1996 to 2000, neither the new administration of President Emil Constantinescu nor the parliament succeeded in gaining control over the economy and both eventually lost the trust of citizens, who were suffering economically.

In fact, the first six years of transition and post-Communist rule (1990–96) had been sufficient for the second-rank party activists, state company managers, communist bank directors, kolkhoz chairmen, secret service officers, and all the other privileged persons and groups of the former regime to gain ownership over the country's resources, to control the economy, and to persuade the Western democracies that they were Romania's only reliable economic partners. They used this control as a weapon to dictate economic outcomes. Price increases, high unemployment rates, miners' strikes, and economic instability created disillusion, frustration, and doubt within society that the democratic parties were the best political option.

The political scene had also diversified. Already by 1992, Petre Roman, Ion Iliescu's first Prime Minister, left Iliescu's National Salvation Front to form a new Democratic Party with a social democratic orientation. To achieve a firm parliamentary majority the Democratic Convention was obliged to accept this new party in the new non-communist government. In doing so, however, there were permanent tensions within the government coalition. The Democratic Party, with its leadership roots in the communist system, opposed and blocked all initiatives concerning restitution of property, the adoption of lustration laws, and other key actions. President Emil Constantinescu's administration and the Christian Democratic Peasant Party, the largest in the coalition, were politically weakened.

Post-Communism Returns and the Effects on Civil Society

After four years of a non-communist government and presidency, Romania experienced the total collapse of the democratic forces and along with them the prospect for building a non-communist multiparty system. In the November 2000 elections, Ion Iliescu, still leader of the Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PDSR), won presidential elections and acceded to an unconstitutional third term. In parliamentary elections, the Christian Democratic Peasant Party did not pass the electoral threshold for membership in parliament while the PDSR won a large plurality to lead a new government. A year later, the historical non-communist Social Democratic Party was swallowed by the larger PDSR to form a united Social Democratic Party (SDP). The National Liberal Party (PNL) was hijacked by a new leadership of former communists and merged with the Democratic Party of Petre Roman. Thus, the original parts of the National Salvation Front effectively succeeded in defeating the main anti-communist party, the Peasant Party, and co-opting the leadership of the other parties.

In 2000, these "reform" communists came to power with a new agenda. Over time, the PDSR leaders had realized that they could not stop the course of history and accepted the Cold War victory of the West over the Soviet system. With this acceptance, they decided "to convert" to democracy and to neutralize, step by step, the fragile democratic political parties and thereby take over the system. Although the former communists experienced a large setback in 1996, by the end of 2000, they achieved a total victory over the anti-communist forces of Romania. They controlled all key political offices and institutions, the economy, foreign trade, and the secret services. Iliescu's prime minister was Adrian Năstase, a former communist who was married to the daughter of one of Ceaușescu's most prominent ministers. During the Ceaușescu regime, he had been rewarded with foreign assignments and fellowships in international institutions. Using the recipe of "conversion," Năstase and Iliescu stressed Romania's

Euro-Atlantic integration in their external policies but internally reinforced Romania's unwritten rules of fear and pressure against civil society. Taking advantage of the Western decision to quickly integrate the former communist countries, the Iliescu-Năstase tandem convinced the Western countries that Romania was starting to be a functional democracy with respect for human rights and the rule of law. It was hardly the case.

Already weakened by internal division and having compromised its mission, civil society's position suffered further with the return to power of the former communists. For one, the "conversion" recipe forced a change of strategy. Paradoxically, one of the main strategic goals of Romanian civic groups—integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions—now coincided with that of the former communists. Although Romanian civic groups considered the "conversion" to democracy by the former communists to be false and resumed a critical stance towards the government by denouncing human rights abuses and high levels of corruption, these groups and their leaders continued to advocate for Romania's quick acceptance into the EU and NATO out of fear that Romania's orientation might return to the earlier "grey zone," where Russian interests would prevail.

The civic groups hoped that once Romania was admitted to Euro-Atlantic institutions, the government would be pressured to continue and deepen its reforms. But this proved mistaken and, step by step, the influence of pro-democratic civic groups was further diminished as Western governments preferred to engage in dialogue with the Romanian government. The transition negotiations that previously included civil society groups now became strictly bi-lateral and Western governments willfully overlooked the failings of their new partner. For the West, it became important to promote the new Romanian government as a reliable ally and, in turn, to placate the Romanian government by cutting funding and ultimately abandoning anti-communist civil society groups.

For the Iliescu-Năstase tandem, an active pro-democratic civil society was a significant threat to its new hold on power. The post-communist administration had no inhibitions in undermining democratic civic groups, creating new NGOs (so-called GONGOs) and promoting them abroad, and distributing resources on the basis of party or government loyalty. Criticism by genuine civil society groups was stigmatized as anti-state and anti-patriotic. Western governments started to fund GONGOs as legitimate and civilized partners for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Soon, the free local publications ceased to print and grass-roots associations lost their headquarters and access to local financing. Strong commercial televisions, most of them owned by rich businessmen whose fortunes were built from their communist pasts, controlled the public agen-

da. Civil society entered a new-old situation: some groups became highly dependent on political elites while others entered a fight for survival.

The New Division

As the 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections approached, a new division arose among democratic forces. In order to prevent Adrian Năstase, the PDSR candidate, from succeeding Iliescu as president, some of the most prominent anti-communist intellectuals, human rights activists, and pro-democracy politicians adopted a “pragmatic” strategy to support the main opponents of the PDSR, the “Justice and Truth” Alliance, called DA for short (meaning “Yes” in Romanian), which was made up of the National Liberal Party and the Democratic Party. They backed DA and its victorious presidential candidate, Traian Băsescu, with astonishing devotion despite the fact that both DA parties now were highly infiltrated by former Securitate and military officers and dominated by post-communist businessmen.

Traian Băsescu was a versatile politician with deep roots in Ceaușescu’s communist system and information services. He was a former minister during the early Iliescu regime in the 1990s who had gone with Petre Roman and the Democratic Party after the split of the National Salvation Front. The unconditional support he received from the main intellectual groups associated with the former Democratic Convention seriously damaged the credibility and legitimacy of Romania’s civil society, which was perceived now as a political instrument for Băsescu.

For the ten years of Băsescu’s presidency, Romania’s civic movement was in great jeopardy. Not only had it lost its earlier influence and credibility, it had strayed from its initial strategic goal of establishing a functional and authentic pluralist democracy. Due to the subordination of many talented individuals to political party interests, the civic movement lost many outstanding voices, its capacity for criticism, and its authenticity.

At the urging of a number of civic groups, President Băsescu did initiate the action of the Romanian Parliament to condemn the communist regime as criminal. But he and the parliament rejected the adoption of any legal consequences resulting from such a condemnation. There was no real lustration and a serious limitation was placed on the restitution of confiscated properties. The reparations for persons and groups who suffered communist repressions proved ridiculously modest when compared to the substantial pensions of their former perpetrators.

President Băsescu’s authoritarian administration moved the ideal of achieving a pluralist democracy with respect for human rights farther away than ever. Fundamental rights and freedoms of Romanian citizens came

under constant pressure from state institutions, with very little free media to speak of. Professional advancement was again achieved mainly through party affiliation and loyalty. A high level of corruption undermined the very basis for a free economy. And the dominant Orthodox Church and the public education system both undertook to inculcate values of nationalism, religious intolerance, and antipathy to liberal democracy. During this period, Romania had one of the highest percentages of complaints addressed to the Strasbourg-based European Human Rights Court, mostly involving the violation of property rights, access to a fair trial, and the right to freedom and security. Active Watch, a human rights NGO, reported growing political pressure on the media, as well as cases of internal censorship at state-owned TV and radio companies and direct attacks by political leaders against journalists. Having no inhibitions, former Securitate officials turned media tycoons used their private television stations to undermine trust in democratic institutions, courts, and democratic civic NGOs.

A fair analysis of Bănescu's ten years would also note some positive achievements: a consolidation of Romania's position as a loyal strategic partner in the Transatlantic Alliance; increased access to public information and Securitate files (except for cases related to priests of the Orthodox Church); and greater autonomy of the judicial system that resulted in the conviction and punishment of high officials for corruption and administrative abuses (these included the former Prime Minister Adrian Năstase, the media mogul Dan Voiculescu, and a number of members of Parliament, ministers, prefects, County Council presidents, and mayors).

Where Did Civil Society Go?

Civil society's massive regression began with the disappointing experience of the failure of the first non-communist administration. It led some civic leaders to adopt a pragmatic position of supporting "repenting" former communists compared to Ion Iliescu's more regressive party. They believed these insincerely converted former communists would adopt genuine democratic behavior and values. This belief turned out to be mistaken.

Another mistake of many civic groups was that they oriented themselves towards political elites and lost their connections with society. Their focus and energy went to influencing high ranking politicians and not maintaining contact with citizens. As a result, they lost their function as being a voice for the people; they lost their representational legitimacy.

But another explanation for civil society's regression was the basic need to survive in conditions of progressively decreasing resources for pro-democracy civic groups. From their beginning, these groups had to find foreign donors to support their activity. National ministries and local

governments in Romania were not and are not willing to finance outspoken groups. Until Romania's accession to the European Union in January 2007, civic groups had access to decent financing from Western governments, institutions, and foundations. After the EU accession (and even before), the majority of these donors left Romania and local civic groups had to reorient toward the EU's highly rigid financing mechanisms.

Theoretically, the funds available for civil society in EU member states are huge and cover all sectors of civic interest. But the priorities and the procedures for such funding are formulated without consulting civil society in any given country and are set by Brussels, usually for short-term, single-year, and faddish themes and goals. Another limitation lies in the general obligation for the applicants to add 20 percent of their own funding as a contribution. Often, beneficiaries have to cover up to 50 percent of the costs in advance and are reimbursed only after six months (in the best case). In addition, because of the large amounts of public money involved, transparency and anti-corruption mechanisms have created an extraordinary level of bureaucratic rules and limitations.

The financing philosophy and procedures of the European Union have produced harmful consequences. GONGOs and business-oriented NGOs are the ones generally with the capacity to deal with such bureaucratic requirements and thus attract and receive EU funds. Those more pro-democratic civic NGOs that implement EU-financed projects spend most of their energy in administration and lose the very reason and goals of their initiatives. The EU Commission exercises severe control over the content of the projects. In effect, genuine civic initiatives are discouraged.

There are free and independent civic groups that continue to be active and to fulfill their mission. I am proud to represent here Liga Pro Europa, one of Romania's most respected civic associations. Founded by twenty-one Transylvanian intellectuals opposing the communist dictatorship, Liga Pro Europa played an important regional role in the transition process from communism to pluralist democracy. We were very active in combating nationalist manipulations used by the former communist secret service to keep their influence. Liga Pro Europa carried out projects supporting the restitution of properties confiscated by the communist regime and providing moral and material reparations to political prisoners and other victims. We participated in all civic movements aimed at preventing the communists' return to power and disclosed their scenarios for promoting divisions within our fragile democracy. Liga Pro Europa has also been a strong civic mediator in the historical reconciliation of Romanian and Hungarian communities and in combating all forms of ethnic, linguistic and religious discrimination. At the core of our activities has been education for democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

In its twenty-five years of activity, Liga Pro Europa has trained hundreds of young civic leaders and published dozens of booklets disseminating ideas of civic courage and commitment. Summer camps, civic advocacy campaigns, local grass roots activities, as well as national and international seminars and conferences made a consistent contribution to the empowerment of civil society in Romania. As part of the Centers for Pluralism network, Liga Pro Europa participated in fact finding missions, election monitoring, human rights protests, and advocacy campaigns. It also contributed to and benefited from the permanent exchange of experience, mutual support, solidarity and protection of civic groups and individuals from the post-communist and post-Soviet countries.

Similarly to other civic groups in Romania and the region, however, Liga Pro Europa faces today serious challenges due to the fragility of financing and lack of resources. Paradoxically, just as tensions in the region are rising due to attempts of the Russian Federation to destabilize the new democracies and when there is a growing rejection of liberal values in our countries, the very existence of the most important pro-democracy civic groups in the region is in doubt.

The new generation of civic leaders is mostly pragmatic and is ignorant of or uninterested in history and is generally submissive to the priorities of funders and governments. Civil society in the region needs a window of opportunity for transferring the values of civic activism from the old to the new generations. The unfinished business from 1989 requires new strategies of civic empowerment and the recognition of the fact that funds cannot replace commitment and ideas.

We in the region all run the risk of having democracies without democrats in our countries. It is a very dangerous prospect. It is the antechamber of arbitrary government and authoritarianism.

A Positive Postscript, January 2015

Since giving this paper at the seminar in Warsaw, there have been more positive developments. Happily, civil society has a great capacity of regeneration. The more severe the pressure, the stronger, perhaps, is the reaction. The seeds of twenty-five years of civic and democratic values have begun to germinate. A new generation of civic leaders is emerging with less iconic profiles than the heroes of the dissident times or initial transition period but with much larger outreach to the younger generation. Using social media, this new civil society contributed to a large extent to the unprecedented victory of an outsider in the presidential elections of November 16, 2014.

For the first time, Romania's elected president is a non-ethnic Romanian. Klaus Werner Iohannis is a Lutheran belonging to the small community of Transylvanian Saxons, a clear contrast to the Orthodox majority. Also, until recently, he was absent from national politics; his popularity is due less to a political orientation or ideology than to the good and proper management of Sibiu, a medium size Transylvanian city. Under Iohannis's leadership as the elected mayor of Sibiu for 12 years, the city achieved a remarkable economic development and became a European cultural capital and tourist attraction.

But the victory of Iohannis over the socialist Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who had strong support of the SDP-led coalition and nearly unlimited resources, was not due simply to his personal merits. The real reason of his victory was the huge public indignation of Romanians living abroad who were prevented from voting in the first round. Prime Minister Ponta, fearing the vote of hundreds of thousands of mostly younger Romanian voters working abroad in consolidated democracies, instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Romanian Embassies to limit the number of voting stations abroad to prevent a large diaspora vote. Many Romanians were unable to vote after queueing long hours in front of the embassies and consular offices. They started to protest using slogans of the anti-communist students' protests from Bucharest University Square in June 1990.

Romanian and foreign analysts were surprised by this civic mobilization, a result of public outrage and indignation at this blatant violation of the fundamental constitutional right to vote. It seemed to contradict dominant nationalist and religious fundamentalist trends until now. In my view, however, this "voting revolution" proved that Romanian civic groups have succeeded in changing public mentalities and empowering our fellow citizens to stand up for their rights.

A wave of optimism now animates Romania. The last opinion polls show astonishing shifts in public perception. Suddenly, the majority of Romanians expressed their trust in the country's direction and in its public institutions. The percentage expressing trust in the elected President is the highest in polling history. Civil society seems to be reaching out to citizens, as it did in the early nineties. It is too early to draw conclusions about the new civil society. Its mobilizing efficiency is impressive, but its agenda and values are less strategic and clear. The task in the next years is to combine the skills of the new generation of civic leaders with a renewed sense of social responsibility, democratic solidarity and historical memory.

Presentation

Surprising Turns: Civil Society in the Region & Serbia

by **Miljenko Dereta**

I, like Smaranda Enache, am very glad to be here and I am also glad that I am following Smaranda's presentation, since she mentioned many of the problems that we have in the region. It made me realize how little we communicate with each other despite our closeness in geography. This is one of the problems of civil society in the region today.

I am not going to talk about the past in Serbia; it would take too long to analyze the last twenty-five years. Instead, I have divided my paper in two parts. The first part is more generally about civil society in the region and globally; the second part addresses the situation more locally in Serbia.

Part 1: Civil Society in the Region

To begin, let me quote a very interesting recent open letter of Danny Sriskandarajah, the general secretary of the biggest global civil society network, CIVICUS, written to its members:

Overly reliant on state funding, we have allowed our work—our ambitions even—to become constrained by donor requirements, by the need to avoid biting the hand that feeds us. Where once a spirit of volunteerism was the lifeblood of the sector, many NGOs today look and behave like multinational corporations.... They have corporate-style hierarchies and super-brands. Saving the world has become big business.... Many courageous, inspirational people and organizations are fighting the good fight. But too many of us—myself included—have become detached from the people and movements that drive real social and political change. The corporatization of civil society has tamed our ambition; too often it has made us agents rather than agitators of the system.

I think this open letter to civil society organizations around the world describes very well how deep is the global crisis that challenges citizens who want to participate actively in the processes that should improve their quality of life in all aspects.

The Last 25 Years

Twenty-five years is a relatively short period to analyze civil society. But in the post-communist countries it is a complex period, full of surprising turns with differing results.

It must be remembered that in the process of bringing down communist regimes in the region, civic groups played the role of non-existing political parties. They were the ones to challenge the regimes in power. In Poland, the core of the movement was a trade union; in Czechoslovakia a group of intellectuals around Vaclav Havel; in Yugoslavia, a group of Slovenian academics, who initiated discussions on economic reforms that coincided with artists' and students' demands for more democracy.

These groups were successful in achieving difficult and complex political changes and perceived themselves as having not only the responsibility but also the right to remain an important factor in the political life of their countries. Once in power, however, some of them faced unexpected and unpleasant surprises. Presumed political allies showed no enthusiasm to let civil society representatives enter a space that the politicians wanted to control completely.

From a longer term perspective, the Eastern Europe experience contributed to the "re-discovery" of civil society by EU bureaucracies. Smaranda Enache noted the stated obligations of the European Union to consult with civil society, yet these consultations are simply formal. Civil society organizations in Eastern Europe had the expectation that since they contributed so much to the changes in their countries they would have a right to be consulted and even listened to. But their demands for concrete involvement in political decision making created unpredicted opposition from European institutions. Although the stipulation for formal consultation appears to widen the process, in fact the involvement of citizens is minimal—more symbolic than substantial—and it is very often just a simulation with pre-prepared decisions already made. Many barriers exist to prevent this consultative process from bringing about real changes. It is one among many issues of civil society organizations within the EU.

The Biggest Challenges

One of the biggest challenges for civil society in the region was that it was impossible to maintain over a long period of time the energy and will of citizens to be engaged in a battle for the common good and a system of values. Over the course of many years, there was a feeling by citizens of wasted energy given the poor results of their engagement. Together with the "normalization" of life and its newly acquired comfort and commodities, fatigue set in, with citizen's growing passivity evolving dangerously into apathy.

New self-proclaimed "democrats" in power remembered well the danger of an engaged, active citizenry to the "stability of the state," now meaning to their own positions in power, and they limited citizen participation through restrictive legislation or procedures, or simply in practice.

In Serbia, for instance, public debate on new laws is obligatory, but this is usually avoided through “accelerated parliamentary procedures.” Political engagement by citizens is perceived as incidental, while passivity and apathy are seen as normal. At the same time, the public has great expectations of civil society organizations. In the current political situation, however, commenting on scandalous political decisions may be the only possible activity left to civil society groups.

The other big challenge is the now blurred boundaries between politics, business, and civil society. What were once three clear circles with minimal overlapping are today creating just one circle with almost no space for independent activities. I strongly fear that citizens will be the biggest if not the only losers of this interdependence.

Cleavages

In a 2007 article, “Democracy in the Post-Communist World: An Unending Quest?”, the authors offer some useful classifications:

The most obvious fact is that fifteen years after the collapse of communist regimes, there is a wide range of political systems in the region that can be grouped in three categories: democratic, semi-democratic, and autocratic. While some countries enjoy high-quality democratic institutions, others suffer under authoritarian regimes of various hues. More important, despite the welcome phenomenon of “colored revolutions”—an attempt to renew the commitment to democracy in some post-communist countries—the prevailing tendency in the countries that emerged from the Soviet Union is toward “competitive authoritarianism.”¹

Within these classifications, the examples of Serbia and Hungary become especially dramatic. Smaranda mentioned the case of Hungary. In Serbia, there was a period of intense building of democratic institutions after the fall of Milošević in October 2000, but this was suddenly stopped by the assassination of the reformist Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić, which took place in March 2003. This two-and-a-half-year period was followed by a process of slowing down of reforms, reopening the question of the position of Kosovo, and the gradual reintroduction of a party-state in which the state remains the biggest employer and the only qualification for a job is belonging to the party in power. So now, also as a result of free and fair elections in 2012 and 2014, we have in power a coalition of political parties that were originally responsible for the wars of 1991–95

¹ “Democracy in the Post-Communist World: An Unending Quest?” by Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, and Milada Anna Vachudova, *East European Politics and Societies*, February 2007 (vol. 21/1, 7-30).

and the Kosovo war in 1999. These are parties whose previous leaders stand accused before the Hague tribunal and whose current leaders avoid all responsibility for what happened. This has taken Serbia back from a democratic path and placed it in an authoritarian status. It is a result of a lack of lustration and of the successful fight for survival by extremist nationalistic forces in Serbia.

In the new reality, the definition of the NGO sector comes from Putin. In the Russian Federation, civil society organizations are now defined as foreign agents if they receive support from outside the country. Of course, actors have agents, writers have agents. But in our culture, an agent is a traitor or a spy. The political positioning of Viktor Orbán explains why Hungary was the first state in Central and Eastern Europe to adopt Putin's definition by accusing the government of Norway of interfering in the political life of Hungary. The reason was that NORAD [Norway's development agency] supported ecological groups, which in the government's reasoning meant support of the Green Party. We can rightly fear the rich imagination of enemies of democracy in applying these criteria. Such thinking will spread like wildfire in the region because regimes are waiting for an excuse to take action against those who are critical of them. Here, we are all agents.

This is a big problem because one of the main common points of our countries is the need for funding from abroad. The development of civil societies in poor countries is quite difficult and almost impossible without foreign support. The accusation of being foreign agents has always been an argument for those who didn't want citizens to be active but at the same time citizens' participation has been until now funded by support from outside the country.

Financial Sustainability and Donors

The role of donors as well as their profile and culture changed dramatically in the past two decades. In former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the donors were mainly a mix of US private and public foundations with almost a complete absence of European funds. Their goal was to contribute to substantial changes in transitional countries. At the time, Europe was incredibly passive. I could never understand that, why Europe didn't care about democracy as much as the US did.

Slowly, and especially after Milošević's departure in 2000, funding shifted largely to state agencies like USAID in the United States and then the EU Commission. They introduced criteria that very few NGOs could meet as well as procedures more appropriate for businesses and state bureaucracy than for citizens' associations. In that process, civil society or-

ganizations have confronted a high level of inflexibility, bureaucratization, and expectations by donors for minimum investments or matching funds.

When we speak of civil society, there is often a blurring of real meaning. Civil society is spoken of outside of its relationship to citizens. It is just an abstract term. The biggest change in the work of civil society organizations in the region—and which I think is the biggest problem—is that in the old times we used to have a project. We had an idea that was a reflection of the needs of people, of citizens. We saw the problem, we defined it, and we proposed a solution to it. Then we looked for donors. The hardest change came when the donors assumed the role of setting the agenda and priorities, which was diametrically opposed to how civil society worked and completely changed the culture of civil society organizations.

Today, the majority of civil society organizations look to the donors, both private and public, waiting for calls for proposals, waiting to see what the needs are of this donor “constituency,” and trying to impose these needs on their own countries or communities. The donors are surprised by anyone proposing their own ideas for developing civil society. They perceive us as serving the interests of the donors, not of our own constituencies. For example, the USAID—since it is not just a European problem—imposes programs that are devised in Washington. It doesn’t care about the ideas and priorities of civil society organizations.

So, civil society organizations no longer know who they serve. At a conference in Turkey, I asked a question of the participants: “Who sets the agenda, civil society or donors?” The almost unanimous answer was donors. This is the new reality. Civil society organizations are not looking anymore to their constituencies but are trying to satisfy the donors’ requirements. This problem generates a lot of mistrust of institutions, whether local, national, or international, and will result in a decrease of involvement of citizens in their activities.

Furthermore, donors, acting as both the agenda setters and funders, react negatively to any criticism, viewing it as insubordination or lack of political discipline. If you criticize any of their decisions—and many of them need to be criticized—you are erased from their reports and their list of potential partners. My organization, Civic Initiatives, was completely erased from [the USAID’s] 2013 survey on civil society, although we are the main capacity building and advocacy NGO in Serbia. “We just cannot control you as much as we would like,” was the unofficial explanation.

I think that the only appropriate organizations that should be setting the agenda are not donors but civil society organizations, meaning citizens.

New Technologies

A completely new aspect of citizen's organization is the direct result of new technologies.

Information and communication technologies have opened up spaces of power, influence, and association to new configurations of actors, leading to a significant growth of online civil society activity and enabling civic networks to be built across geographical, social, and physical divides. Social networks became a space for completely new forms of communication, organization, networking and mobilizing citizens.

The World Economic Forum study on civil society introduces a new division of "off-line" and "on-line" CSOs. We can now talk about "two" levels of civil society. The communication is not just horizontal anymore, it also becomes vertical. It opens a challenge of transferring activism from "virtual" to real life and this is often the main reason for skepticism by those who do not understand social networks. It is a process and methodology that has to be developed but even at this stage there are several very inspiring examples of such synergy in which actions begun online have been transferred to real life with concrete results. I will mention two good local examples. One relates to an arbitrary political decision of the ruling party and the Serbian Orthodox Church to move the remains of Nikola Tesla, the great scientist. His ashes have always been in a special urn at the Nicola Tesla Museum in Belgrade, which some found objectionable on religious grounds. The Church's decision was widely criticized on Facebook and in twenty-four hours thirty thousand signatures were collected on a petition opposing the decision. Within forty-eight hours, two thousand people came out to protest in front of the museum. The decision was postponed. A second example was the mobilization of young people during the recent floods in Serbia in the spring of 2014. An impressive, ongoing exchange of information from the web successfully turned into numerous practical actions, including providing humanitarian aid, volunteers helping people cope, and so on. This online activity has established a still functioning network of volunteers.

It means that there is a new challenge in forming new ways of organization and I think that we are in a good position to deal with this. There are many proposals from young people that are not being heard. Still, when I had the chance to speak to young people about the problems in Serbia, I asked "How would you change things?" The answer was, "It is difficult to change things because it is hard to bring people to the streets." No one mentioned any change coming from institutions—changes can only be thought of as coming from the streets. The system defends itself so well

that people think they cannot influence things within institutions. I myself was in parliament for two years and I saw how it functioned. It was a waste of two years. Nothing really happens in the parliament. It happens in the heads of party leaders; it is a plutocracy that we face.

Recapitulation

There is a very interesting television advertisement in which deep in the forest a mother is eating the last cookie in front of her shocked daughter and says to her, "Life is not a fairy tale."

I was reminded of it when I saw the title of our meeting, "Unfinished Business." It seemed perhaps that we had lived in a fairy tale believing that the "business" of democratic development of states and societies could ever be finished. We know, of course, this is a naïve presumption and that we will not have time to rest or enjoy the fruits of our activities. Nevertheless, when we review the last twenty-five years, a lot has been achieved, not equally in each country but at least now we have among us friends who share our value systems, our goals, and are willing to help us to achieve them.

I will dare to propose that we should concentrate in each of our countries on creating a state of rule of law, equality, and human rights where freedom of speech and association is guaranteed. We should educate citizens so that they can rationally evaluate political options and so not elect those who limit citizens' freedoms or promote inequality. We should no longer presume that free and fair elections are the only institution in a democracy, since they can serve also to legitimize non-democratic systems.

Part 2: Serbian Case Study

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, civil society organizations in Serbia worked under conditions of ongoing war and economic crises, followed by the NATO bombing in 1999. After the overthrow of Milošević in the year 2000, there was hope that the period of misery and long-term instability would pass, but today we still face the unsolved problems of taking responsibility for the wars, of a continued difficult economic situation, and pervasive poverty.

We understood the role of civil society organizations during the 1990s, when they were declared "anti-governmental." After the democratic change in 2000, however, we became "collaborators," or a partner of the government, in building a different state of Serbia.

At the moment, the greatest obstacle to Serbia's EU accession remains the issue of Kosovo. Implementation of the agreement signed in Brussels required the ongoing normalization of relations to get a date to start membership negotiations in January 2014. There is considerable disagreement in Serbian politics about what approach to take towards both the European Union and Kosovo. In any case, ethnic tensions are not decreasing, since the implementation of normalization measures do not adequately address grassroots problems.

In terms of regional cooperation, there are growing tensions due to debates over mutual law suits on genocide and over measures to decrease the rights of ethnic minorities, among others. There is an ongoing need to build further regional cooperation, especially among countries involved in the conflicts of the 1990s. This cooperation would have direct impact on internal issues regarding the respect of rights of national minorities.

Harmonization with European standards continues and important laws and strategies have been adopted over the years. But Serbia still has a long way to go in order to integrate EU laws and regulations in practice, especially with regard to judicial reform, security, and fundamental freedoms. Corruption is prevalent in many areas in Serbian society despite all the existing laws and institutions. Implementation of existing laws and strengthening the rule of law remains a great challenge.

Political Context

In the 2014 elections, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which emerged from Vojislav Šešelj's Serbian Radical Party, became the country's new leading party. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) joined in forming the government along with other small coalition partners. The new coalition is thus made up of the parties that are responsible for the wars in the region during the 1990s. These parties now carry out policies that are diametrically opposed to their core election platform on which they obtained citizens' votes. Overnight, these parties became pro-European and have taken very concrete steps towards accelerating the European integration process and resolving the Kosovo problem peacefully. Only yesterday, the present authorities called such policies traitorous and opposed to the national interests of Serbia. Still, within the borders of Serbia, this government shows its nationalistic and authoritarian approach in many ways (the promotion of clerico-fascistic groups, putting together lists of anti-patriotic CSOs and individuals, weakening democratic institutions and media freedom, among others).

The struggle against corruption, which is trumpeted from the rooftops, is the main reason for public support of the government. Admittedly, the manner in which this fight is carried out is highly questionable since it

is done outside normal government institutions. Up to now, it has been primarily directed towards settling of accounts with political rivals and former corrupt officials and not towards creating a new legal framework that would prevent corruption in the future.

Political parties are the actual centers of power in which all policy decisions are made. All decisions are made by a narrow circle of party leaders, who place the interests of the party above all national interests. Institutions fail to do the work they should do and fail to do it in the right manner. It is a big challenge for our future work in encouraging civic participation.

The Economy

There is a deep economic crisis. State-owned and state-controlled public enterprises are inefficient and unprofitable, creating huge losses and offering opportunities for systemic corruption. The desire to keep social peace has resulted in public debt that reached greater than 60 percent of GDP.

The high unemployment rate is alarming, with an estimated 30 percent of Serbia's working-age population being unemployed, with the hardest hit being women, minorities, and young people under the age of thirty. In this situation of pauperization and high unemployment, violence has increased against ethnic minorities, especially Roma. More than forty-five women were killed by domestic partners or family members in 2013 (an increase of 90 percent over 2012). Violence among young people in sporting arenas, in schools, and on the streets is on the rise. Particularly in ethnically mixed geographic areas.

Discrimination against minority groups continues to be a problem. Both the rule of law and awareness about human rights are considered low in comparison with other European countries. The situation has gradually improved regarding the legal framework for equal treatment, but the commitment of the government for implementation of the law is deficient.

Civil Society and Citizen Participation

All these circumstances contribute to a decrease of civic activism in Serbia and a low level of citizen's participation in elections. The government is detached from citizens and their needs and citizens are excluded from decision making processes. Citizens are impoverished, passive, and unmotivated to be involved in politics when facing the struggles of everyday life.

The encouraging factor is that there are more than 23,000 currently registered non-profit and civil society organizations in Serbia, with almost half of them established after 2009. This means that the NGO sector is

relatively young; only 15 percent of organizations were founded before 1990. The majority of organizations deal with social services, culture, media, recreation, and the environment. Although civil society groups would recognize the economy as the burning problem in society, not many deal with the issue. There is a need for building NGO capacity to engage more citizens' groups in dealing with the economy, to monitor economic measures, and to play an active role in this area. Yet, in recent times, Serbia has seen a gradual, but marked reduction of activity by foreign donors. Most embassies and foreign government development agencies have indicated that they will be gradually phasing out their support to Serbia as the country progresses towards European integration.

In this context, Civic Initiatives is encouraging citizens to engage in solving problems that affect their lives. The role of civil society should again be to put citizens in motion to actively participate; to demand from government to respect the rule of law and to solve numerous existing issues in Serbia in an adequate manner; and through different forms of association to take part in making new policies and directly implementing them.

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Responses

Ales Bialiatski

First, thank you for welcoming me back. I had to keep silent when I was in prison. So I now have this habit of being more quiet and did not intervene until now. I will do my best to make up for it.

I am very pleased to be here. All these days have been very useful for me. Everything we discussed gave me a lot to reflect on. Let me share what I think has happened in our country over the last twenty-five years.

The activity of citizens in our country has come in waves. One early wave came in 1968, sparked by events in France, then in Warsaw, and then Prague, and those events spread even to Belarus and Russia. The next wave was at the end of the 1980s. A lot of people took to the streets and it is difficult to explain why it happened. There was a crescendo in which masses of people went out to protest. But then the wave receded. People retreated from the streets and the activity subsided. Later, after some time, the people took to the streets again in 2006 and then 2010 to protest the elections, but were suppressed. Why does citizens' action manifest itself in this way? I think one of the reasons has to do with the quality and structure of civil society organizations. When they exist, they are able to channel peoples' emotions and energies into constructive action. When they do not, then people retreat to their quiet existence.

The peak of mass protests in Belarus was in 1989–90. The people who protested forced the government to take certain definite steps to establish independence. Vincuk Viačorka described it well. But then the wave receded. At the time, many people decided that the mission was accomplished. Many of our friends and colleagues who participated in these actions and democratic changes withdrew from the citizens' movements. They went into business, returned to their jobs, and focused on their personal lives. Why? They believed the changes were irreversible and that these changes were in the capable hands of people in the state structures and political parties. This was a fundamental mistake. It turned out later on that without active citizens' participation and action the political parties and structures could not defend these changes in a critical situation against real threats to democracy. This allowed the reversal of the democratic transformation by Lukashenka.

In the early period, there were a number of moments when something could have been done better. There were rallies up until 1991 in Belarus but our politicians did not use them to remove communists from power. The Belarus Popular Front was a minority in parliament at that time. The attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991 should have prompted us to

call for early elections in Belarus, but we lacked the understanding to act with more decisiveness. Another turning point was the constitutional crisis in 1996 when there was a movement of MPs to petition for the impeachment of Lukashenka. But, here again something was lacking; in this case it was the critical mass of people who would come to the streets to defend Belarus's democratic future. Practically speaking, we, the democrats, were the ones who did not take advantage during these critical junctures.

So, Belarusian civil society was not strong enough to sustain democratic changes. Miljenko Dereta noted that it is difficult to sustain victories. It was the case in Belarus. It was very difficult to maintain the victories of the early 1990s without enough citizens willing to maintain their participation in civic action. We can speculate why our Lithuanian colleagues were able to surpass this threshold to achieve a different level of democratic development. I do think that the prior period of independence of the Baltic States played a huge role. We were deprived of this independence by the Red Army since 1919. In the Baltic States, at critical moments the older generations played a positive role in their revolutions. In Belarus, the older generation did not experience independence and did not possess those democratic values.

When you look at other events, for example the Arab Spring, one can see how the absence of civil society following the revolution meant that there was not a continuing positive movement for democracy. Only Tunisia sustained its democratic revolution. I was in Tunisia one month after the revolution meeting representatives of civil society, including from professional organizations, trade unions, and civic and human rights groups. Many of the activists had been educated in France, had traveled abroad, and they survived in a dictatorship with features similar to Azerbaijan and Belarus. This gave more hope that Tunisia could go through a more positive transition, unlike in Libya, where we see ongoing conflict and instability. The Tunisians I spoke with could recall only two human rights organizations existing under Qadafi and their leaders lived in France. Without any real civil society, how can you hope to sustain the achievements of a democratic revolution?

In Belarus, we experience a certain *cul de sac* in relation to the development of civil society. There is nothing indicating new winds of change. We have to focus on youth initiatives, new movements started at the grass roots level that are not financed from outside. We understand that this is the future for overcoming the crisis in Belarus. For example, the silent applause movement [when students lined the streets in mock silent applause of officials in motorcades] was an interesting example of action outside usual political or civic unrest. It was a new form of protest. Often such initiatives have no clear political import, whether they are bicycle clubs or

ecological initiatives. They are initiatives simply where people can realize their potential and mobilize without the government's orders.

We can clearly see that youth activism is looking for forms of effective activity. We represent the old structures. We had a lot of successes, but we have a number of disadvantages, especially by acting on the same path for the last twenty-five years. We are ready to help the new energy of youth initiatives with the hope that it gives a new political impulse. We can clearly see that we are returning to the starting point. Twenty-five years ago we were looking for a new energy. We were organizing campaigns for the victims of Stalinist repression, we launched new movements.

I believe and I am convinced that democracies should protect themselves. One can look at the example of Poland, which after the French Revolution adopted a new constitution and established a new Sejm [parliament] only to be occupied and dismembered by Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Catherine the Great felt threatened by the democratic changes in Poland. Without sufficient armed forces, Poland was divided. So, neighboring countries did not get to experience the impact of Poland's democratic constitution. I believe the same can be said for Ukraine today. I am really worried that Ukrainians will not be able to defend the successes of their revolution, to develop their own path to democracy. The dangers exist internally and externally. Moldova also faces a similar threat.

Let me make up for being quiet earlier in the program and respond to several comments and topics that have been raised. On decommunization, I believe lustration is a necessary tool that allows us to protect ourselves, strengthens the gains of a revolution in a given country, and when it is carried out according to the rule of law it does not violate principles of human rights. We human rights defenders wanted dictators to be condemned and demanded that dictators from Africa be brought to the International Criminal Court in the Hague to account for the hundreds of thousands of victims of repression. Lustration is strengthens trust towards the new state authorities and new governmental institutions that are starting everything from scratch. And lustration should be done sooner rather than later.

People spoke of the decline of values in the West as part of the rise of consumerism. But it is the liberal and humanitarian values of the West *and* its high standards of living that offer a vastly better choice than what the East can offer or what our government can offer citizens. It is an important difference when an ordinary Ukrainian or Belarusian sees his own standard of living compared to that in Western countries. But we need to make this comparison without saying that consumerism or high standards of living somehow negate or overshadow Western values of justice, morality, and

human rights. In this regard, one should use certain markers, like the death penalty, religious freedom, freedom of speech, and so on.

As regards NGOs, there was the comment that the drive for money kills their creativity. On the other hand, money is the lifeblood of NGOs. It is necessary for survival. Isa Gambar noted that NGOs are being supported, but not political parties. But I must say that in Belarus the journalists and human rights defenders suffer the most. They are the object of the new crackdown. The parties in Belarus are not at such a risk right now. What is most important is that we should not divide ourselves. We should unite political and civic movements.

Sergey Duvanov said yesterday that we in the authoritarian post-Soviet countries lost. I do not agree with him. You can see that even in the present situation, overall we are developing towards progressive democratic goals. We lost some of our progress. But our movements have the direction towards democracy.

Maria Dubnova

Today, all the features of the Soviet regime as they appeared during the latter stages of the Soviet Union—that is, the period after the invasion of Afghanistan—are returning.

The independence of the judiciary is totally compromised and courts are being used to crack down on private businesses. The state considers again that private profit means a loss of revenue to the state. One out of six businessmen is the object of criminal prosecutions.

As for the media, all of you know the terrible propaganda of all of the television broadcasts. They pour out outright lies that cultivate hatred. And this wave of hatred is hard to control. It generates an image of “the enemy.” There are both internal enemies, such as liberals, national traitors, and fifth columnists, and then there are external enemies, such as the West and the United States. Every word of Russian media must be mistrusted. Any truthful information must be found from alternative sources, which are scarce and being made even scarcer. Independent media are closing, journalists lose their jobs, and bloggers are forced to register as media outlets.

There are no mechanisms for civil society to have influence on policy. Discussions with civil society representatives on issues of legislation, for example, are a simple formality. Meanwhile, witch hunts have started for “foreign agents” within civil society. The phones of activists are tapped and emails are screened. Some have been pressured to leave for abroad.

All of this is reminiscent of the late Soviet regime. Some of you have raised the idea that this phenomenon may be related to Russia’s historical

cycles of reform and counter-reform, revolution and counter-revolution, or engagement and isolation. This idea gives some feeling of hope that following the nadir of counter-reform, perhaps there will be a new rise for reform. On the other hand, it also puts us in the framework of isolation that was experienced after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. After introducing Russian troops to Ukraine, the situation is similar. This mechanism operates more like a wheel. We all know how to survive these circumstances; it is a skill like riding a bicycle. We know how to preserve ourselves and how to resist internally.

The public discourse today brings us back to topics that were discussed in the 1980s. Arkady and I together published a book that described this period, which we thought was behind us. We did not think it would return. It was an inverted time, when one could spend the whole night in a queue in order to get theatre or exhibition tickets. The relationship with the West was interpreted only in terms of European culture. Now, on Facebook, people are discussing the same dilemmas that faced my parents. The matrix is the same.

There were several strategies for how to behave in that period. One strategy was active resistance, which required a great deal of courage. The second was emigration. The annual number of emigrants is rising every year. Until recently, there were mostly economic emigrants; now we see the rise of political emigration. People are ashamed that they do not have the will to fight. All the questions return: where to live? how to live? These are questions not about the comfort of oneself or even the welfare of one's children, but about political and existential well-being. It should not be so.

Currently, with the Ukraine war, we divide people into those who think like us and those who do not and, after the annexation of Crimea, into those who think it rightfully belongs to Russia and those who think it does not. The Ukrainian events have divided people as in the past and these divisions insinuate themselves into their circle of friends. We have to screen people who are friends. You see purges of Friends on Facebook. Trying to find alternative sources of information is also similar to the 1980s. In the past, we retreated into the kitchen for discussion—we called them kitchen debates.

While it does seem there is a retreat to the 1980s, there are some differences. In the Soviet days, there were some guarantees of economic welfare. Today, there is the ghost of destitution, especially among the elderly. There is also no development in the fields of science and technology. And the level of cynicism among state authorities is even higher.

These new aspects generate certain positive attitudes among people. In the past, there was a different direction to look to for the essence of

life. Some used to look for it in culture. Nowadays, people have tasted travel, supermarkets, personal space: a taste of life that they didn't have in the Soviet past. There is also a new phenomenon of volunteering. People understand they cannot wait for the government's help. There are different campaigns to help the elderly, the sick, and children. There was nothing like that in the past. I myself participate in this volunteer movement and see how it develops human networks.

There are new negative aspects, however. One can see it on the internet. In the past there were values like culture and civility. People filtered their views through a certain cultural lens. In the era of the internet, the intelligentsia is traumatized by the crude level of discourse. As the contemporary Russian writer Viktor Erofeev wrote in an essay, "Great Russian writers made us see the folk as a jewelry box but it turned out to be a coffin with rotting giblets." Each of us has to decide whether it is possible to enlighten the Russian nation, a nation not prone to enlightenment, or instead to live one's short life somewhere else so that the children can live without trauma and in dignity. We have the experience of our parents transmitting values to their children but we must decide if it is necessary to take our children abroad to live a life of dignity.

We see neo-fascists taking to the streets and pictures of Islamists as two seas that may overflow, but people fear more the return of the Iron Curtain. Russian intelligentsia, in its genetic and behavioral matrices, developed the option of living a meaningful life even behind iron curtains. From our parents and the elderly we were given a simple pursuit of happiness: "We are alive. Not hungry. Not in prison." It is easy to restore the past today because on the one hand the state power draws from the archives and reanimates ready-made models for ruling and, on the other hand, the intelligentsia displays a tendency to return to internal, not active, political resistance. For civic activism to be activated, we must overcome the inherited fear-based behavior we got from our families. For this we need courage, but heroism in peacetime is rare.

We just learned that Yuri Lyubimov, the great director and actor, has died at the age of 98.² He was a role model. These role models are dying but we must continue somehow.

² Yuri Lyubimov was a renowned actor and director who began the Taganka Theater in 1964. His productions tested the limits of censorship, most notably the classic *The Master and Margarita*, by Mikhail Bulgakov, which he brought to the Russian stage for the first time in 1977. He was exiled and stripped of Soviet citizenship in 1984 but it was restored in 1989 and he returned to Moscow to continue the Taganka Theater. — Editor's Note.

Discussion

VYTAUTAS LANDSBERGIS

I am moved to comment on the last two speakers, Ales Bialiatski and Maria Dubnova. They have focused on the “state of the art” on the topic of what is going on in Russia and, through it, Belarus.

Russia is an ulcer on the body of all of us. As Maria mentioned, the state of official propaganda is such that you cannot trust a single word of the media. So how do we keep in touch, keep contact with the society that is against this propaganda? They are switching off the idiotic programs. Can we encourage this tendency, to not be influenced by this propaganda? Of course, to defend civil society, we must do away with this media. It is simply a tool for propagating lies, for propagating over and over that Russia is right, that it is great because it is right, and that it will be greater still because it is right. We have to reject this propaganda and ideology in its entirety.

Right now, a minority runs a society where the majority accepts living in a madhouse. We must accept this reality. Edgar Allen Poe wrote a story about a man inspecting an insane asylum. The medical staff warns him that the patients believe they are all healthy and that the medical staff is mad. Today, all of Russia may become a madhouse and a lot of people are trying hard to achieve this based on the old anti-Western or what I call anti-civilizational matrix of the October Revolution. What happened after October 1917? John Reed wrote about this time in Russia. When Reed visited Maxim Gorky, he was having a nightmare that Russia was heading to Asia with its back to the West. Now, Gorky’s nightmare is coming true.

The question is what is happening inside Russia. Before, the Iron Curtain was outside the country and we were inside it. Now, the Iron Curtain is within Russia. It divides families and divides “us” from “others” or the “aliens.” Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin started this idea with the Nashi movement, whose full name is the “Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement—Ours!” Some people call it Putin Jugend or Putin Youth. They are young toughs who provoke fights during peaceful demonstrations with people who disagree with Putin, like in Romania in 1990, where the miners attacked the students as “trash.” Provocations are organized against anyone who disagrees with Putin.

Therefore the question arises how normal people can survive. You mentioned that there is now migration for political reasons, to be able to live in normal conditions because people don’t want to live inside this madhouse. Then the madhouse will be controlled only by insane people who will turn everyone mad. People are ready to fight for this degraded

Motherland. There is no cure to save the country except to reject this virus. The struggle against the virus must go on.

The future can't be seen in bright colors. But when the bottom is reached, perhaps a positive movement can begin. It is hard to know when the bottom will be reached or what the bottom is. Until then, we must protect ourselves and hope that the madhouse will not be perpetuated forever.

MARIA DUBNOVA

I would like to comment on Mr. Landsbergis's advice that Russians should switch off the television. All of us who participate in peace marches, we threw away our TV sets. But it is not about watching television. Today, participation in civil society in Moscow, in Russia, is a personal act of courage, a personal decision. It cannot be a mass movement. The society has a different pace of maturation. We remember the tanks in the center of Moscow. We know the authorities are willing to do a great deal to suppress mass demonstrations. We know how the peaceful demonstrations in 2012 ended up.³ For our authorities, it is easy to put people in prison and make them hostages. People need to have courage to act and it is a personal decision. We are responsible for our children: at minimum, we can raise our children with certain values and teach them to take responsibility. We are not sure if it will have direct impact, whether or not it will have an impact on the whole society. Yesterday, we visited the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising. There is one display relating how a young woman told her father that she was going to take part in the Uprising and the father kissed her in silence. The responsibility cannot just be placed onto our children. But I do believe we must raise our children not to be silent.

IRENA LASOTA

I want to say a few words about Smaranda's and Miljenko's comments on Western support for civil society. The problem goes beyond imposing specific agendas and selecting recipients on an unprofessional or even worse basis, although this is part of it. Many Western donor institutions and endowments have built and justified their programs on the myth that democracy was built in the entire post-Soviet world from outside by their funding programs. It is a very dangerous myth because it strips the people

³ On May 6, 2012, one day before the inauguration of Vladimir Putin to his third term as president, riot police attacked a demonstration of 20,000 people, part of a continuing protest movement against the previous year's fraudulent parliamentary elections. Police took 400 persons into custody and 28 were charged with criminal offenses. Of them, one committed suicide, one was committed to a psychiatric hospital, and 14 persons have been convicted to prison terms of up to 4½ years. — Editor's Note.

in the region of their self-esteem as important actors in building democracy and forces them into a “business” model in which “democrats” compete among themselves for the donors’ money and the donors choose who are the “best” democrats. But no amount of money can inculcate values and courage. Many donor organizations are led by people who had only a theoretical approach to democracy but without any practical experience. For example, they had the theory that an opposition can win only if it unites. In practice, this meant uniting the dissidents with KGB fronts and parties led by agents.

We have seen the proliferation of international movements for democracy. There is the World Movement for Democracy, Civitas and Civicus, and then there is the Community of Democracies. In 2000, many of us were at one the first meeting of the Community of Democracies in Warsaw. Russia, led by Putin, had just launched the war against Chechnya, but was still being invited to participate as a democracy. We saw how this Community of Democracies was dealing with civil society. Beforehand, at the State Department, government officials decided that it was necessary to hold a meeting of civil society organizations at the same time as the political leaders, but not to hold it anywhere near the political leaders, who were meeting at the Royal Castle, but miles away at the Hotel Sobieski. The agenda was set by political leaders who simply wanted to say that the civil society organizations were meeting to support what they were doing and did not want any controversy, such as protests of Russia’s inclusion in this Community at a time when it was carrying out genocide. Any real expression of civil society was in fact silenced. Indeed, those groups that organized a separate protest were later defunded by government-backed donor institutions. It appears to be the same with the Eastern Partnership, which has been made into a tool for the EU’s economic expansion and uses the civil society meetings to neutralize criticism of governments such as Azerbaijan and Belarus.

VINCUK VIAČORKA

If we mechanically look at the institutions that make up a parliamentary system and we interpret them as being democratic when in fact the society is silenced, this is just a corruption of words and meaning. Smaranda Enache was describing the manipulation of civic leaders in the more democratic setting of Romania; Miljenko Dereta was raising the issue of how elections do not lead to democratic outcomes without an effective civil society. Yesterday, people said our countries’ situations were far apart, but today we see ours is not the only case where there is rollback.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was an initiative to bring six of the countries of the former Soviet space—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus,

Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—into the sphere of economic development and general values of the European Union. Unfortunately, there has been little success. There was a typical bureaucratic *étatist* approach that identified governments with nations and societies. At the same time, the bureaucrats ignored the societies. There are five main activities within the Eastern Partnership and only one involves civil society representatives. No civil society representatives participate or even have the opportunity to monitor EaP economic cooperation projects or intergovernmental “flagship initiatives.” This simply benefits government officials in our non-democratic countries. EU money going to infrastructure may easily be stolen by our officials. The lack of transparency and accountability makes a corridor for corruption. Independent civil society and media does not have the possibility to monitor the use of this money or expose this corruption. Among the six countries of the Eastern Partnership, there are enormous differences, but the EaP does not apply any different approach towards the clearly anti-democratic regimes in some of these countries.

The governments of Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden, which initiated the Eastern Partnership, deserve respect. They believed it was going to look like five branches of a tree, but Brussels cut off some of the branches. It is very difficult to come to a consensus of twenty-eight states, but we must remember that when there is not effective participation of citizens in a country, civil society cannot act as a watchdog. The EaP requires a quick reshaping. Without democratic consolidation of nations of EaP countries, Gazprom can simply roll over these countries and realize the geopolitical interests of the anti-democratic state of Russia.

Let me give an example of what Western support sometimes looks like. There was a European program to support small and medium enterprises in Belarus through a bank fund. The bank fund rejects loans to anyone who was in prison. One entrepreneur had participated in a peaceful protest rally against electoral fraud and was imprisoned for fifteen days. He was denied a loan.

SERGEY DUVANOV

Kazakhstan is at the border of Europe. By formal geographic division, one of its regions is in the European continent. It is a member of the Council of Europe and part of European institutions. I am listening here to these speeches and discussions and the most grave situation seems to be ours. When we speak of civil society in our country, it is within the parameter of the Soviet expression “*sovok*,” shorthand for *homo Sovieticus*, in which the relationship of the individual is subservient to the state. The citizen exists for the state, not the state for the citizen. This is the attitude of citizens within the realm of Soviet ideology. In such a situation, there is only one

hope, “let there be no war.” We don’t care about human rights, protests, rallies, or freedom of speech. Let us simply be allowed to survive, to exist. This is the extent of people’s interests. It is the parameter for defining our civil society.

The situation is aggravated by broadcast media, which is pervasive. It makes idiots of the citizenry. Seventy percent of the media is from Russia; the rest is state-owned. In Russia, there might be some alternative found through the internet, but in Kazakhstan, only 15 percent of the society is connected to the internet. And everyone has the same view.

Here is the paradox: for twenty-five years we tried to build civil society and the building blocks were not citizens but subjugated citizens, the willing slaves of the state. Imagine the following situation: a majority of civil society organizations support the concept, “Crimea is ours,” meaning Russia’s. This is not an independent civil society. During the Georgian war, forty “civil society” organizations were sitting at a conference in Almaty, and there were only two that defended the sovereignty of Georgia and the rest supported Russia. This is what Kazakh civil society looks like and these organizations receive most of the grants from Western governments and foundations.

ERIC CHENOWETH

I will add something to what Irena has said because it is very important. By now, it is necessary to put democracy promotion in quotation marks. While there remain a few intelligent foundations and individually some good programs, the overall practices of Western donor organizations and endowments today have very little to do with promoting democracy and mostly to do with maintaining bureaucracies and self-justification. These practices are adopted supposedly for maintaining transparency, measuring “effectiveness,” assessing “impact,” sharing “best practices,” encouraging “innovation” and “social entrepreneurship,” and creating “self-sufficiency.” We at IDEE knew it before but Smaranda and Miljenko, and others in this room, have quite powerfully elucidated what all this means.

In truth, “democracy promotion” has become a charade that cannot hide a simple fact: over the last twenty-five years, there has been very little democracy promoted, much less achieved, in the spending of billions and billions of dollars. There has simply been an “industry” created in which thousands of people take part but very little of value is actually produced. Any time an opening occurs due to the courage of citizens facing up to repressive dictatorship, the “democracy promotion” industry takes credit for it. But no one takes responsibility for twenty-five years of overall failure, the many reversals of democratic progress, and the success of dictatorship

in pushing citizens back, whether it is in Iraq or Egypt or in the post-communist space.

GÁBOR DEMSZKY

The countries of the whole Soviet empire suffered from over-centralization. It means that we had not just a state-run economy but a political system that was based on a single party and the local soviets had no power at all and followed the central directions of the Communist Party and the ministries at the national center. After 1990, this vertical system was radically changed in some countries, changed only partly in some countries, and not changed at all in others. In certain countries, the old Soviet model of extreme centralization still governs in spite of the pretense of local democracy.

This is important because local government is part of the checks and balances on power in a democracy. Local councils can control the government if they are given power to impose and collect taxes, establish the policies of the local government, and direct the local administration. I talked about these principles in Strasbourg and the national representatives did not like my lecturing on principles of local democracy. It means the national government has less power; it has to share money and power with local authorities and governments. The whole taxing and allocation authority is not in one central authority; they have to share with cities and regions. That became the case in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to give some positive examples.

But now in Hungary, the Orbán government took away power from the local government because it wants to control all the state income. It took over the budgets of schools, hospitals, public works—everything significant. When I left office in 2010, the budget of Budapest was \$2.5 billion. Now, it is \$1.2 billion and its authority over schools, hospitals, and public works was taken away. Thus it has no power anymore. Technically it is a symbolic power. Civil society is weak when the money funding it is coming from the national state or the local government. And when the local government has no money civil society is even weaker. It is that simple.

MILJENKO DERETA

I always have a problem dealing with these very general issues. But what Gábor Demszky said about decentralization is very important. It brings back the idea that I expressed yesterday about the bottom-up approach. The problem with our political elites is a certain degree of disdain in which they hold citizens. They don't really need them. This disdain is especially oriented towards organized civil society because they perceive it as competition if organizations express disagreement with them.

They expect us to support them uncritically. Until we change the culture of communication among the political elites and the citizens who elect them, especially those organized in civil society, we will have continuous problems at the top.

A second point. You mentioned Nashi in Russia. We have Nashi in Serbia. It is a registered organization in Belgrade, a Putinist group. They have continuous actions against everything the civil society is doing that is oriented towards democratic change. All of these actions are tolerated by the state. I am proud to be one of the people they list as one of the main enemies of Serbia on posters they parade on the streets—the posters give my address. This type of threatening behavior is tolerated by the state. In fact, Nashi's offices are in the House of the Army, so in this sense it is not only tolerated but supported. There is a not-so-public but obvious cooperation among some of the regimes in the region and the Russians in their approach to limiting democracy and citizens' participation.