

Looking at the nearly ten years of NIJ's existence, STINA is proud of its achievements. Its work was not spectacular – we did not aim for splashy stories. But it was significant and important. NIJ was alone in covering some of the key transition stories of this period, whether it was the prevalence of corruption, the political uses of ethnic conflict and nationalism, the misuses of privatization, or the ignored stories of civil society. Most importantly, the NIJ covered the development of democracy – and lack thereof – in the postcommunist region. We brought to light the parties, individuals, and processes that many media ignored, but which proved to be among the most important actors in the decade's key democratic events.

Today, due to sudden financial difficulties, the NIJ has had to suspend service temporarily. Nevertheless, it is planning further development and growth in the future. The goal of the Network of Independent Journalists is to create a strong media channel that can offer better, more informed, and more accurate reporting and analysis on Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and the problems the region faces in its transition from communism to democracy. The NIJ tries to create a new forum for comparing the experiences of the countries in the region, how they address common problems, and strengths and weaknesses of different political alternatives. Equally important, though, is the goal of the NIJ to strengthen ties between independent journalists and newspapers and to enhance their professionalism, both for serving their readers and for effectively building a free and democratic media. For the next period, the NIJ intends to promote its service to a wider audience and increase the number of users, create a larger and better selection of texts, increase the network of journalists, improve production, establish a special features service on key regions and themes in this transition region, and, importantly, commercialize its weekly and special features services.

## The Meaning of the Centers for Pluralism for Belarus

by Vincuk Viaëorka and Siarhiey Mackievië

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### Conditions in Belarus

Belarus is not a typical transitional country. Today, it is the only country in East-Central Europe with a dictatorial regime. Its citizens enjoy much less freedom now than they did even in the waning years of communism. Belarus is additionally the only country in the region whose leadership has attacked the national and cultural identity of the populace and is seriously talking about giving up the country's independence to Russia. This comes at a time when all of its neighbors are increasing their independence from Russia and declaring that they are choosing Europe.

Social and political life in Belarus is reminiscent of late Soviet times, when all forms of insubordination to the antidemocratic regime were seen as political opposition. Therefore, there are still no well-defined boundaries between political, social, and labor union activities in Belarusian society. Just as in Soviet times, democracy, national independence and Belarusian cultural identity are seen by democratic society as a single goal. On the other hand, what small experience there has been with relative democracy has resulted in a flurry of development among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which observers sometimes erroneously take as a sign of normalcy in their approach to the country.

Since Belarus was under Russian and Soviet control for the last 200 years, national independence and cultural identity are key issues here. The first independent initiative groups of the 1980s were culturally oriented, and many non-governmental organizations today concern themselves with culture, language, and historical memory. In Belarus, independence and a renaissance of national identity are synonymous with a return to European and Euro-Atlantic democratic values.



Lenin remains in a commanding position in Belarus outside the Parliament. Credit: IDEE

This is the context in which Centar Supolnasc works. Its mission is promoting the values of freedom, democracy, civil society, and independence.

### The Genesis of Supolnasc

The name of the organization was taken from a samizdat bulletin of the 1980s called the Confederation of Belarusan Supolka, which brought together young participants in the freedom and democracy movement of the time. Centar Supolnasc considers itself the inheritor of the ideals of that movement.

The tasks that democratically inclined citizens of Belarus took on then are, unfortunately, the same ones that stand before us today, all these years later. Democracy, respect for human rights, and liberation from disgraceful colonial dependence have yet to be achieved in Belarusan society. The enthusiasm of democrats in the first years after the fall of the USSR proved unjustified. Instead, an aggressive populist dictator took power with the support of certain political elements in Russia. But it was clear even before then that a painstaking rebuilding of society would be necessary to overcome the Soviet heritage. The communist nomenklatura, against whom many of us fought in the 1970s and 1980s, has successfully adapted itself to the new conditions and remained in control, which has demoralized society and led to disappointment with the transition.

A crucial moment in the genesis of Centar Supolnasc came in 1993 with the meeting held by Irena Lasota, president of IDEE, with Belarusan participants in the 1980s freedom movement – the same people who founded democratic political structures in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That meeting was

tremendously significant for us. We found out that democrats were experiencing similar problems in many postcommunist countries and realized how important it is to exchange information and to pull together. She introduced us to the Centers for Pluralism program and invited us to participate.

The formal founding of Centar Supolnasc was in July 1995. Its goal was a resurgence of democracy and pro-independence activity on the level (and for the development) of civil society. The founding members were people active in Belarusan social and political life since the 1980s, such as Ales Bialacki and Hienadz Sahanovic, as well as younger people. The center began operating the same year. The number of people and organizations working with the center grew steadily, and the contacts thus formed began to bear fruit, especially with “informal” initiative groups.

We began to function as an informational and educational resource center for other NGOs, stimulating new initiative groups and seeking out leaders. According to the latest data, we now work with about 150 organizations and initiative groups. The mission of Centar Supolnasc is not just to carry out educational programs and publishing and providing resources for other NGOs. It is to advance ideas and values that matter through such activities.

At the end of 1997, we began courses for young Belarusan regional leaders. It was our first large educational project. We held a series of seminars for 50 participants from around Belarus who were leaders of registered and unregistered public organizations and initiative groups. We gathered together a group of Belarusan instructors for these courses, among them: Dr. Piotra Sadouski, member of the 12th Supreme Council; Dr. Valancin Holubieu, philologist and first Belarusan ambassador to Germany; Dr. Lavon Barsceuski, one of the founders of the Belarusan Humanities Lyceum, and many others. At the end of the project, we published a textbook based on material from the seminars, discussions and lectures. The majority of those who attended have since become public and political leaders and journalists.

Non-partisan does not mean apolitical. Centar Supolnasc gets its orientation from members of various democratic parties, as long as they are truly democratic political forces. The Centar invites members of the Belarusan



Vincuk Viaèorka, chairman of the Belarus Popular Front, with BPF vice chairman Viktor Ivaskieviè, outside the Supreme Court, which denied the latter's appeal of a two year sentence of “deprivation of liberty” and “involuntary labor” for “slandering the president” as editor-in-chief of Raboczy (Worker) newspaper. At the detention facility in Baranavicy (Brest region) where he is serving his sentence, he was elected to head the “open-type corrective labor facility's soviet.”

Credit: The Right to Freedom (Viasna Human Rights Center)

Popular Front Party, United Civil Party, Social Democratic Hramada, and other parties of the Coordination Council of Democratic Forces to serve as lecturers and trainers.

Today, Centar Supolnasc's activity on the national level consists of publishing, education, and working with Belarusian regions. Its latest programs include training of young leaders of regional organizations; training courses for local activists on legal aspects of civil rights defense; training for journalists from the local independent press; creation and support of the Regional NGO Informational Network for the Minsk Region; civic and methodological education for teachers; and mobilization techniques for election campaigns.

Centar Supolnasc has had its own publication, *Supolnasc Bulletin*, since 1997. At the time of its establishment, it was the only Belarusian publication of its type that informed nongovernmental organizations of civic initiatives undertaken throughout the country and that contained useful information and research and analysis on political and humanitarian topics.

There are two main areas of Centar Supolnasc's educational activities. The first is training for civil and political activists and providing education to improve the effectiveness of regional initiatives. The second is increasing a pro-democratic consciousness in society through civic education for the elite, mainly teachers and independent journalists. Due to their professions, these individuals are in a position to effectively influence public opinion and help form a democratic worldview in the younger generation. By giving this elite the necessary civic knowledge, methods, and skills, we hope to reach a wide circle of people. We are counting on a new generation, one espousing new values, to be the guarantee for our country's stable democratic transformation. In this regard, our "golden reserve" is 30 journalists and about 1,500 teachers who have been trained in Centar Supolnasc programs.

### **Supolnasc's Network**

The organizational principle at the heart of the Centers for Pluralism Network is unity based on common values. When there are common values, there is also trust. Organizing a coalition on that basis is much simpler. No one and nothing encroaches upon the sovereignty of the individual organizations. They are independent, but each one of them is conscious of being part of a coalition of values.

Centar Supolnasc applied the same principle when it set up its own national network. The principles of democracy, pluralism, protection of human rights, deliverance from a demeaning colonial legacy, and a commitment to an independent, democratic, and European Belarus are the stated bases for this network. A desired but not necessary criterion for the founders of local branches of the center was their participation in the anti-communist movement of the 1980s because this was a sure sign of trustworthiness.

From the very beginning, Supolnasc has stated the importance of regional initiative groups acting outside the capital and we have actively developed a

network of partner organizations in the regions. They are generally located in the "second cities" of the regions, that is, not in regional capitals. Today, there are 14 organizations in that network, in Barysau, Zodzina, Maladecna, Ivianiec, Salihorsk, Baranavicy, Navapolacak, Horki, Sviethorsk, Pinsk, Lida, Slucak, Marjina Horka, and Niasviz. Their task is to establish themselves as a stable force in the local civil society and to provide information and material support to NGOs in their region.

Every center operates independently and in accordance with local needs and the level of development of local civil society. Thus, the Borisov Resource Center has several youth and social programs, in Maladecna the center works mostly with the intelligentsia, and in Navapolacak, where there are large oil refineries, the organization works closely with the free labor union in that area.

The regional network was very active in the last elections for local councils in March 2003. Despite the fact that these elections were thoroughly anti-democratic, they were not carried out under the total control of the authorities. As a result, several dozen pro-democratic deputies were elected or forced a runoff election in 10 of the 14 cities where Supolnasc is active.

### **Coalition Building**

As part of an international network of like-minded organizations, Supolnasc sees its mission as the promotion of democratic values at the local level. This is accomplished not only through education, but also through building coalitions among democratically-inclined people and organizations in different fields.

The first serious steps in this direction were taken at several conferences held between the fall of 1996 and the summer of 1997. The topics were on independent journalism and the structure of independent publishing. Through these conferences, Supolnasc was attempting to bring together independent journalists and publishers and to allow them to become acquainted and find their common interests. As a result, they formed the Association of Regional Press Publishers.

After that, the basic strategic work of Supolnasc began in earnest in the consolidation of the growing number of genuinely pro-democratic public organizations in Belarus. A coordinating umbrella group was clearly needed, especially to counter the false presentation of civil society made by the dozens of former Komsomol, nomenklatura, or governmentally-organized NGOs (or GONGOs).

At the end of 1996, in December, Centar Supolnasc held the first Forum of Belarusian NGO Leaders, where the idea of an Assembly was brought up. Later, on February 22, 1997, more than 250 organizations participated in the first Congress of the National Assembly, united under the following four principles: independence of Belarus; market and democratic reforms; defense of human rights; and integration into European structures. The main tasks of

the Assembly were established as organizing the defense of NGOs' rights, facilitating informational exchange among NGOs, fostering a system of mutual assistance and service, expanding the influence of the third sector in Belarusian society, and involving new organizations in the Assembly.

Today, the Assembly of Pro-Democratic Nongovernmental Organizations operates effectively on the national level. This umbrella structure encompasses more than 600 public organizations, making it the leading umbrella for the Third Sector in Belarus. It has various concerns and is active in many activities in carrying out its mandate. Today, it is organizing the defense of NGOs that are being repressed, like the Belarus Students Association and the Ratusha Resource Center for NGOs, among many others; it publishes and disseminates information on the work of NGOs; and it works with international organizations for the defense of the Third Sector, training, and other activities.

For the presidential election, the Assembly established two non-political electoral campaigns: "VYBIRAI" (Make a Choice) electoral mobilization campaign and the national independent monitoring network. These were the largest civic actions ever organized in Belarus and the first such nationally coordinated campaign, involving tens of thousands of people. Notwithstanding the political outcome, the gains in building human resources through these campaigns are a permanent pro-democratic resource for our country [see Centers for Pluralism Newsletter issue no. 26, Winter 2002, and also the "Election Bulletin of the Mobilization Campaign," available in English from Centar Supolnasc or IDEE – Editor's Note].

The electoral campaigns have helped spark new forms of cooperation between NGOs, such as the "Let's Make It Better!" youth initiative in 20 Belarusian towns, the campaign to save the Kurapaty memorial in which thousands of people prevented the gravesites of tens of thousands of Stalin's victims from being paved over by a national road, the defense of independent newspaper editors and of freedom of religion in the face of new repression and legislation, among many other initiatives.

Also, Centar Supolnasc is involved in other networks and coalitions that have been sparked by its efforts, including the Belarusian Association of Resource Centers, which has six hubs in every region and 57 partners, and the Association of Civic Education.

### International Cooperation: The Centers for Pluralism Network

Centar Supolnasc, along with similar organizations in other countries from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, is a member of the international Centers for Pluralism Network. This network unites active people who, as a rule, have a rich experience in struggling against anti-democratic regimes and who come from countries trying to overcome the dark legacy of communism and colonialism. Centar Supolnasc is not a political organization, but it does hold to political ideals. That is why it is associated with the

Centers for Pluralism Network, which means that we acknowledge our readiness to actively fight totalitarianism and the legacy of totalitarian regimes.

With the help of IDEE, we joined the ranks of Centers for Pluralism. For Centar Supolnasc, the network of Centers for Pluralism was a bridge to the world. There were CFP-sponsored international conferences (such as the ones in the mid-1990s on overcoming the legacy of totalitarianism held in Sofia and Moscow), as well as the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe's journal *Uncaptive Minds*, with its panoramic view of the processes underway in the transitional communist countries. There was the Centers for Pluralism Newsletter, with its important database on democratic organizations in our region and many opportunities to work with organizations and foundations from countries with "old" democracy.

As part of this overall IDEE CFP Network, we also benefited from our strong association with the CFP's IDEE-Warsaw. Due to its geographic, linguistic, and social closeness, it helped us gain knowledge in NGO management and establish new contacts in Poland and beyond. Through such connections for example, a training program was carried out with the Assembly of Welsh NGOs, IDEE-Warsaw, the Youth Informational Center, and the United Way Organization. The special Belarus program that emerged from Irena Lasota's trip to Belarus with Monika Agopsowicz gave important support to Belarus's developing civil society. The withdrawal of IDEE Warsaw and associated organizations from the network of values represented in the Centers for Pluralism is a great loss for Belarus.



Vincuk Viaëorka speaking at the Moscow Symposium on Postcommunism in 1996. At left is the veteran human rights and independence leader Vyacheslav Chornovil, chairman of the Rukh movement in Ukraine.  
Credit: IDEE



The 13th Centers for Pluralism Meeting was held in Minsk in April 1999 with the title “Fighting for Democracy Together.” This meeting had great resonance in Belarusian society. We hosted our colleagues from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, the U.S. (who had trouble crossing the border), and Ukraine. Representatives of the Supolnasc national network took part in panel discussions, along with the leaders of other Belarusian NGOs, political parties, and labor unions. This allowed our friends from the CfP Network to get acquainted with the situation in Belarus firsthand, while the Belarusian participants saw that many of their problems were not unique and that their neighbors could provide some guidance for them. CfP guests also experienced a street demonstration by the organization Chernobyl Way marking the 13th anniversary of this nuclear disaster whose consequences continue to weigh on Belarus society and remain ignored by the government. The demonstration gave our foreign guests further insight into Belarus as they saw the police attempt to intimidate the marchers. Many participants joined the demonstration to display the solidarity of the entire CfP Network, an act that people have remembered long afterwards.

Thanks to the CfP Network, we have been able to establish an abundance of contacts with partners in other transitional regions and organize cross-border programs. Among these have been two meetings of Belarusian and Lithuanian NGOs, exchange programs at Kyiv think tanks and foundations, and exchanges with Serbia and Montenegro.

The importance of these exchange programs should be strongly emphasized. If dictators can trade experiences in repressing democratic civil society and in remaining eternally in power, democratic forces need to share their own experience. That is why we were so pleased to host our Azerbaijani colleagues from the INAM Center for Pluralism and Azerbaijani National Democratic Foundation, who observed how we built our coalition for a broad popular campaign. They were able not only to apply that knowledge to Azerbaijan, but also to give much valuable advice to Belarusian organizations based on Azerbaijani experience.

Another distinction of the CfP Network is its assistance in times of emergency. We have received valuable moral support through them in such situations, for instance, the Internet campaign and wave of letters of protest when one of us was imprisoned in 2001.

In a broader sense, the CfP Network serves as a compass in a sea of contacts. Recommendations from colleagues in the network are the most reliable when immediate orientation and contacts are needed in another transitional country. For example, when formulating a strategy for the electoral mobilization campaign, our colleagues at Civil Initiatives helped us analyze similar events in Serbia. To a large degree, the success of the VYBIRAI campaign was made possible by specialists in Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine, who were recommended to us through the CfP Network.

Centers for Pluralism is a means of solidifying values, even when they go against the mainstream. This was the case with the war in Chechnya and the Tbilisi Declaration on Elections.

### Future Prospects

When the CfP network was first established, it seemed that people starving for freedom had only to be nudged in the direction of democracy and the transition was inevitable. Then the people who provided that impulse could return to their own business. However, in the majority of transitional countries, the role of those key figures has not diminished in the last ten years. In addition to the old authoritarian, totalitarian opponents of democracy who remain, there are new pseudo-democratic opponents, people who use democratic rhetoric, hold democratic-looking events, and occupy positions in existing regimes, thus discrediting democratic values.

This is the moral low path. It is important to offer an alternative to it. It is important that every country have its moral guardians who prevent the society from backsliding. And those people need international support and assistance. In order to anticipate a situation and react to it in a timely manner, there needs to be comparative analysis, which nobody does better than the network of friends and allies of the Centers for Pluralism.



During the April 1999 meeting of the Centers for Pluralism held in Minsk, Belarus, the Belarus Popular Front and other opposition organizations organized the annual march to commemorate the Chernobyl disaster. CfP participants, including Dilara Setvelyeva and Ayder Muzhdaba from Crimea (center, looking at camera) and Ivan Lozowy from Ukraine (immediately behind Ms. Setvelyeva), joined the demonstrators, in an act of solidarity.  
Credit: IDEE

## From Moscow to Cuba: The IDEE Difference

by Alexander Podrabinek

*Alexander Podrabinek is editor-in-chief of the Prima Human Rights Agency, the successor of Express-Khronika, the long-time independent daily newspaper and later human rights weekly started first in 1988 still under the Soviet Union. As a dissident, he was several times arrested, imprisoned, and deported to Siberia. His study on the political uses of psychiatry is among the most well known works of dissident literature.*



*Alexander Podrabinek speaking at the Moscow Symposium on Postcommunism.*  
Credit: IDEE

Once one of our journalists who read the English-language press brought me an American journal and said, “Look at what sensible things they’re writing. You keep on saying that everyone in the West is fascinated with Gorbachev and *perestroika* and has all sorts of illusions about the USSR. Just read this article. You won’t be sorry.”

That was in the hot summer of 1989. It was stifling in the office and the work was unending. I didn’t have the will or the energy to torture myself with an English translation.

Several weeks later, our stubborn journalist brought in a Russian translation of an article from the same journal and suggested that we publish it in the paper. I was taken aback. We did not publish articles from other newspapers and magazines. And what could Americans have to say that was so special any way? But my duty as chief editor demanded that I read it.

I don’t remember what the article from *Uncaptive Minds* was about, but it was written with deep insight into the political situation in Eastern Europe and gave a sober analysis of events there. I was amazed. It was hard to find an article of that caliber in the Russian press. We bent our rule and reprinted the article in *Express-Khronika*. I looked to see who published the journal. It was Irena Lasota and Eric Chenoweth of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe.



*Alexander Podrabinek showing an issue of his human rights newspaper Express-Khronika to a Tibetan democracy activist at the first meeting of the World Movement for Democracy in New Delhi, India in 1998.*  
Credit: IDEE

We soon began to work together. Irena Lasota and I exchanged information and opinions and sometimes wrote for each other’s publications. We almost always agreed on the main issues.

Then we met in person, in Warsaw, when Irena invited me to an IDEE seminar. After that our relationship became more than just professional. Journalism for me at that time was not so much a profession as a means of opposing communism and

its aftermath in our country. Few in the network that Irena set up throughout Eastern Europe were sympathetic to my point of view, but we found good journalists and just good people there. We could always count on support and understanding at IDEE.

I was confident that Irena would always lead me down the right corridors in Washington, introduce me to the right people and act as an advocate in the burdensome and confusing search for funding for our newspaper. Since I had no experience as a financial manager, I put my full trust in Irena’s experience. I knew that she could tell of our plight better than anyone else and explain the things that I naively did not even know needed explaining.

*Express-Khronika* newspaper and, after its closure, PRIMA Human Rights News Service received support from many outstanding people and organizations. We are grateful to them all, even those who suddenly abandoned us in hard times. But I have always been sure that hard times would never change our relationship with IDEE.

I think that the distant past is very meaningful here. Today, in the multifarious crowd of human rights activists and newly-minted democrats, you can meet benevolent people who know how to say all the right things and succeed in their affairs. But you can only really trust the ones who have been tempered by prison or who were part of the anticommunist resistance when that could mean the loss of liberty or sometimes life.

That is why I was delighted to accept Irena's invitation to travel to Cuba in support of the dissidents there. One of the ideas of IDEE, usually expressed in a joking tone, is that Eastern Europe is a political, not geographical, concept. Communism is not exclusively a trait of the USSR or Eastern Europe. It is universal, not national. And so Cuba is also the subject of IDEE's attention.

Thus Irena Lasota built an "IDEE empire" not by conquering provinces, but by supporting anticommunists wherever they are: offering solidarity to all those who strive to rid their countries of communism.



Alexander Podrabinek, who worked as a private taxi driver in Moscow to support his family and his human rights activities, drives a rickshaw in Havana in order not to travel with a police-reporting state taxi driver. In his first trip to Cuba in 1996 with IDEE's Irena Lasota, he met with independent journalists, editors, and human rights activists and on his return to Moscow prompted sympathetic Duma members to create a Cuban Human Rights Committee. Credit: IDEE

In 1996, when I went to Havana for the first time, I felt as though I had landed in Moscow in the mid-1970s. There were meetings with dissidents, searches, interrogations, listening to Radio Marti through the jamming, and it all tells us that communism has not been eradicated from Earth and that only a few out of its millions of prisoners are prepared to oppose it. Fancy seminars in free countries, grandiose meetings in fashionable hotels, wise discussions in quiet offices, safe arguments about the problems of the Third Sector – that's all child's play compared to the anti-Castro movement in Cuba.

Since then, I have been to Cuba several more times and become acquainted with the heroic people who are now in Castro's prisons. One of the times Irena and I went to Cuba, she was arrested right in Jose Marti Airport at the passport checkpoint. I was not arrested and did what we had planned. Irena was held for a couple of days and then expelled to Mexico and we met in the

Bahamas after I faced my own problems leaving the island.

Besides Eastern Europe and Russia, IDEE is interested in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia. Everywhere Irena Lasota and her colleagues find defenders of civil liberty and opponents of state tyranny. IDEE is a very successful organization in what it does and what it achieves.

Many people dislike Irena Lasota and IDEE for just that reason. Unfortunately, such people are not only those opposed to what IDEE stands for, but also those with the same goals as IDEE but fewer results. Most of the respected human rights organizations with multimillion-dollar budgets could not do what IDEE does with humble resources, a small staff, and a three-room office in Washington. The contrast is glaring to those organizations spending all their funds on administration and writing only optimistic reports for their sponsors.

Today IDEE is going through tough times. The National Endowment for Democracy, which supports hundreds of projects around the world, has decided to stop helping IDEE. This may seem strange, but it is part of a larger trend. Like many other philanthropic foundations, NED now prefers to support projects that have fewer real results, are less confrontational toward totalitarian regimes, and are more comfortable for those who write flowery reports from the safety of emigration.

There is nothing new under the sun, as Ecclesiastes rightly noted. There are thousands who take care of themselves and few who care for those who have no freedom. IDEE has done much for such people and, God willing, will do even more.