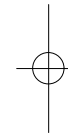
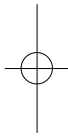


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**CENTERS FOR  
PLURALISM –  
NETWORKING FOR  
DEMOCRACY:  
10 YEARS**



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Cover Photo: *Participants at the Bratislava Meeting of the Centers for Pluralism came across the following graffiti walking through the Old Town: "A Democratic Society is Political Pluralism".*

*Credit: IDEE*

## Introduction

# Out of the Rubble: Building Free Societies Ten Years of the Centers for Pluralism

by Eric Chenoweth and Irena Lasota

*Eric Chenoweth and Irena Lasota are co-founders and co-directors of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe.*

The Centers for Pluralism formally began in 1992 as a project of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe. Its first meeting, involving twenty-five people from eight countries, was held in March 1993 in Warsaw, Poland. The idea for organizing such a network was first presented by Irena Lasota at an informal meeting with Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy. The idea was met with enthusiastic support and the NED financed the program from its beginnings until the spring of 2003.

The origins of the CfP are earlier, however, developed out of our experience supporting anticommunists and democrats, first as the Committee in Support of Solidarity (established at the end of 1981) and then as the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (created in 1985). We had in that time acquired many friends and contacts in East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Since 1988, we had also published *Uncaptive Minds*, a journal of information and opinion on Eastern Europe and a forum for a wide-range of oppositionists and, later, newly victorious democrats to express themselves. In this time, traveling among Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the western states of the post-Soviet empire, we were meeting people with similar experiences opposing communism, similar pro-democratic views, similar needs, but often with different and original ideas for how to solve or approach problems. In each country, we tried to put them in touch with each other individually, knowing that each contact would be beneficial. But after a few years we started to explore with a number of IDEE's colleagues in the region the idea of establishing a network of people and non-governmental organizations in East-Central Europe committed to bringing a profound transformation from communism to their countries, one based on the dynamism of pro-democratic movements that emerged in 1989 and composed of people who were neither conformists nor neo-communists.

Already, so quickly after the 1989 revolutions, most international donors were frowning upon the idea of an overtly political network of pro-democratic civic organizations. The most important trend at the time was to work with whatever existed, whether it was pro-democratic, post-communist, or communist. Indeed, Western institutions were desperate to find technical

competence in spending the vast amounts of money being bestowed on the region and they believed often that this competence was best found in the old structures or the pseudo-new structures of the communist machinery that had turned out tens of thousands of supposedly professional apparatchiks. It took too long, in the view of many institutions, to train and educate a new generation of professionals and community leaders. But, whatever their inexperience, it was the new generation of activists who were in fact committed to democratic ideas and not Western money. Such individuals, working at the crossroads between political parties and NGOs, between politics and civic activities, not only existed but also were desperate for support.

The idea of the Centers for Pluralism was simple: to identify key pro-democracy non-governmental organizations in each post-communist country that would serve as vehicles for helping develop other civic organizations and networks within their own countries as well as promote contacts and working relationships with counterparts in other countries. In this way, IDEE hoped that the Centers for Pluralism could strengthen the foundation of civil society as well as the networks of democrats for the region. The educational premise was that it is easier to learn from each other and together; the political premise was that under authoritarian regimes and in times of transition to democracy, it is necessary to fill the social vacuum with authentic, honest civic organizations that can create the necessary environment for liberal democratic politics to emerge and function.



*IDEE co-directors Irena Lasota and Eric Chenoweth, far right and second from left, meeting in Bulgaria with J. Dimi Panitza, second from right, president of the Free and Democratic Bulgaria Foundation, and Mihail Berov, far left, director of the first Center for Pluralism.*  
Credit: IDEE

Today, the term civil society (or Third Sector, as it is called in Europe) has become so commonplace and all embracing that it is hard now to understand its meaning and importance. It is hard, in fact, to remember that the term regained its importance and use in countries that emerged from communist dictatorship, where the free functioning of society had been almost totally repressed and nearly forgotten after so many generations. The idea of civil society was revived by intellectuals and workers seeking alternatives to communist social organization in the form of independent human rights groups, political organizations, trade unions, and other institutions such as scouting, educational societies, or clubs built around hobbies. In the minds of East European intellectuals, the political meaning of civil society was clear: it was the anti-state, the place where members of society, if they decided to

risk the repressive consequences, could find some measure of freedom to think, speak, write, and act independently as fully developed individuals. It meant individuals choosing to reject privilege based on membership in the Communist Party and one's adherence to an anti-human state. It meant individuals sacrificing their careers and educations for the sake of principles and adherence to human rights.

Soon after the beginning of communism's collapse two different interpretations of the meaning of civil society clashed and nowhere was this clash more evident than in the distribution of large amounts of foreign aid for "building of civil society." On the one hand there were the same foreign



*Irena Lasota speaking with Mustafa Djemilev, chairman of the Crimean Tatar Meclis, at the meeting of the national Kurultai in 1996. The CIP program in Crimea helped a model democratic community to rebuild civic structures after returning from 50 years of deportation.*  
Credit: IDEE

social engineers who believed that with a few million dollars they could create a set of non-political, non-partisan, "professional," and technically proficient non-governmental organizations; on the other hand, there were each country's indigenous organizations, driven by passions and politics deriving from the experiences of previous decades, ready to learn through trial and error, and neither pliant nor obedient toward foreign donors. Quite happily, we worked with this more impoverished but for us more interesting part of the so-called Third Sector.

Although the period of 1989 to 1991 seemed like an uninterrupted period of freedom emerging from dictatorship, the "revolutions" at this time were not uniform in bringing freedom to the countries of Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union. In some countries the years 1989-90 marked the end of communism, while in others it was the painful beginning of the end – an end that is not over yet. The twenty-eight independent countries that emerged out of the communist world had different political, social, cultural, historic, and other pasts and circumstances. While some countries quickly adopted the basic institutions of democracy (new constitutions, elections, free media, etc.), in many countries, former communist leaders used their positions to establish new dictatorships by using the old state machinery of repression. Often, they used nationalist and ethnic conflict as a new ideological foundation for their rule. In other countries, postcommunist elites, trained not in the ideas of civil society but in the hard rules of communist hierarchy, emerged as the most important political force in their countries, often delaying or dis-

torting economic, political, and social reforms but still able to convince Western governments and funders of their competence.

In such a situation, the emerging civil societies in these countries found themselves without the same networks as the communist elites; only the informal networks built fighting communist repression and promoting democratic principles. IDEE had traditionally worked with dissidents, independent journalists, independent trade unionists, teachers, human rights activists, and students – those who were at the forefront of the democratic changes. The Centers for Pluralism program set out to help strengthen those democratic circles and bring them together in an overall regional network of civic organizations and groups committed openly to pro-democratic goals and organizing a broad range of civic and political activities aimed at building their country's civil society following decades of communist rule.

### Why Pluralism?

Pluralism as the network's central concept came to mind as a natural antidote to communism. Under communism there was one party, one leader, one friend, one enemy, but also one past, one history, one society, one future. In the first years after the collapse of communism too many people looked to replace one dictatorial system with another, or simply assumed that there is only one, right way. Our friends gathered in the Network of Centers of Pluralism were people with open minds. Not adhering to any dogma, sometimes they might define themselves as "liberal conservatives," sometimes as "conservative social democrats." Most often, they were escaping definitions. They were looking for different ways and different approaches to bringing about genuine democracy and building a free society on the rubble of communism.

Thus, by pluralism, we meant bringing together differences within the community of democrats. This meant political differences, social differences, linguistic differences, regional differences, national and ethnic differences, religious differences, and geographical differences. The Centers for Pluralism was in fact the only network that spanned all the regions of the former communist (or socialist) world, bringing together democrats from all parts of Eastern Europe (southeastern and northeastern) with all parts of the former Soviet Union, and bridging the gap between individuals coming from different and distinct socialist systems (Yugoslav and Soviet).

The word pluralism thus functions also in the sense of diversity, embracing people from many countries, many regions, diverse cultures, and different religions. In today's post-9/11 world, it is significant to note the span of the Centers for Pluralism across a wide array of religions – Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism – as well as individual denominations. Visiting a church in Lviv, participants counted their denominations: thirteen (not including agnosticism or atheism). At each meeting of the Centers for Pluralism, there is always a display of the host country's cul-

ture; in nearly all cases it means a display of the many cultures and ethnic groups within the host country. (In Tirgu Mures, it meant seven groups performing their culture's distinct dances.)

More importantly perhaps, pluralism means different political viewpoints on some of the key issues affecting the region (privatization, the pace of democratization, the new social stratification). There have been heated discussions about the roots of nationalism and whether it can be a positive foundation for representative statehood or whether it is a destructive political force (or, as most have agreed, both); about the need for decommunization and the need for compromise on the past; or about whether there was any compromise on human rights.

Pluralism means a range of strongly held ideological views but also a willingness to face issues with the assumption that there may be different answers to social and political problems. The network is open to different ideas, but within the framework of democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights. Within this framework there is debate about what is democracy, the limits of freedom, the paradoxes of human rights, and different approaches to building civil society.

### What Are the Centers for Pluralism?

The first Centers for Pluralism began networking in 1992-93 in six countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia). In the next three years, the program quickly expanded to Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Crimea, Croatia, Estonia, Russia, and Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo). The CfP Network began to work next in all three countries of the South Caucasus, in Chechnya, and in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and other countries of Central Asia. Today, there are twenty-four Centers for Pluralism and twenty-five Centers for Pluralism Partners in twenty-three countries and regions (see Annex I).

What are the Centers for Pluralism? In most cases, they are organizations that have broad civic and educational programs and are committed to networking within and across borders as a means of strengthening civil society. In fact, as Miljenko Dereta of Civic Initiatives in Serbia has noted, "the Centers for Pluralism are often the most important and significant NGOs in their countries." His own organization, for example, played a central role in fostering and mobilizing civil society and citizen participation in the democratic movement that brought an end to the Milosevic dictatorship. Today, Civic Initiatives is among the most important NGOs in Serbia promoting civic life and civic education. Other Centers for Pluralism are as well known for their work in their own countries: the Armenian National Committee of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, the D. Aliyeva Association for the Protection of Women's Rights and the Inam Center for Pluralism in Azerbaijan, Supolnasc in Belarus, the Forum of Tuzla Citizens in Bosnia, the Jaan

Tõnisson Institute in Estonia, the Center for Development and Cooperation in Georgia, Kosova Action for Civic Initiatives, the Center for Civic Initiatives-Prilep in Macedonia, the Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Montenegro, the Foundation for Pluralism in Romania, and the Karta/Memorial in Russia. In each case, these organizations play distinct and special roles in promoting democracy, human rights, and civil society in their countries and regionally. This Network was enhanced over the years by many other key NGOs in different countries that played important roles in different parts of the CfP program but were not acting as overall coordinators in their country. We called these organizations CfP Partners.

A number of Centers for Pluralism played important roles early in the program's history but later their organizational activity diminished for a variety of reasons. For example, the Foundation for Free and Democratic Bulgaria/Center for Pluralism-Bulgaria, directed by Mihail Berov, was the first Center for Pluralism and it set the tone for the overall program. In one year, it developed a computer training center and publishing center for independent media, a shelter for homeless Roma children that provided education and access to the schools (one of the first programs of its kind in Bulgaria), a voter participation program, a small grants program supporting initiatives of local NGOs in the regions, and an HIV education program (including the first Eastern European translation of Earvin "Magic" Johnson's groundbreaking book on AIDS for teenagers). In 1991 and 1992, it also organized the first series of regional conferences on decommunization involving many Centers for Pluralism (and hosted a similar IDEE conference in 1996). Its most recent CfP-related activity, in 2001, was a regional conference on the opening of secret police files and regional truth commissions.

One organization must be mentioned on a less happy note. The only organization founded by IDEE itself was Foundation "IDEE" in Warsaw, also known as IDEE-Warsaw. For many years, it played an important coordinating and facilitating role for the Centers for Pluralism. Its original director, Monika Agopsowicz, hosted the first regional meeting of the Centers for Pluralism, and she initiated the Centers for Pluralism Newsletter, the information data base, and in part the exchange program. While the statutory president was Irena Lasota, in fact Foundation IDEE operated mostly independently but with regular oversight of programs and finances. It was a situation that worked well under the initial leadership. Unfortunately, though, under a different leadership beginning in 1998, IDEE-Warsaw succumbed to unethical and corrupt practices and hid its behavior from the organization's president and founder. When, finally, the president acted and replaced the management board, it was too late. The organization had to be placed in liquidation due to high indebtedness. The investigation into Foundation IDEE's finances also made clear that these practices extended to other related Polish organizations and went beyond anything imaginable within the Centers for Pluralism community (see [www.idea.pl.org](http://www.idea.pl.org)). The report on Foundation IDEE



by Zofia Romaszewska, a leader of Poland's democratic opposition movement, is a cautionary tale as we enter a new period of civic development in the region.

### The Regional Network

The CFP Network is the only network in CEE/FSU region that has been functioning for over ten years and, over that time, has seen a constant growth of participants and extension of programs. It is a network without any formal organization and without a separate administration that would otherwise eat most of the funds. IDEE plays a coordinating role, especially in specific activities of the program and in organizing the region-wide meetings. The network operates on a cost-necessary basis. The Centers for Pluralism Network was built in a variety of ways and through complementary means: a grants program providing different levels of support to CFPs and Partners; an information database provided by members of the Network and deposited in IDEE-Warsaw; an English-language *Centers for Pluralism Newsletter* edited by IDEE and co-produced with IDEE-Warsaw; exchanges and internships between organizations from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe; common programs across borders developed by two or more Centers (such as various Schools for Young Political Leaders, monitoring of elections, NGO training programs, among others); the Network of Independent Journalists (which developed a Weekly Service serving 300 different users); and semi-annual and annual meetings (18 full meetings and 9 regional meetings of the Centers for Pluralism).

The *Centers for Pluralism Newsletter* was among the first common projects of the program. Initiated at the first meeting in Warsaw, the *Newsletter* was begun as a means for sharing advice, skills, and information among NGOs in the initial Centers for Pluralism Network. It quickly became a resource for the whole region. In addition to publishing meaningful articles on key issues affecting civil society in the region and how-to columns, the *Newsletter* offered sections for NGOs to advertise their activities and needs as well as a section for exchanging basic contact information by name, country, and type of activity. In short, the *Newsletter* aimed to reflect the principles and ethos of the CFP Network itself.

The basic framework of the *Newsletter* was copied by a number of Centers in their native languages: Karta-Memorial/Ryazan started a Russian-language edition for the former Soviet Union; Supolnasc published a Belarusian *Newsletter*, Inam Center for Pluralism an Azeri-language version and the Institute for Statehood and Democracy the Ukrainian-language version. Finally, a Mongolian-language *Newsletter* was introduced this year. In each case, they shared material with the English-language edition, as well as the basic framework, but adapted their *Newsletters* to their own countries. Finally, several CFPs developed their own distinct newsletters, like the Civic

Initiatives' *Mreza*, using a different framework but on the basis of the CFP Newsletter. All of them distributed their issues free of charge to the hard-pressed NGO community, reaching a total circulation of more than 5,000 with a much more extensive readership. In addition, the English-language *Newsletter* became an important resource for Western donor and other organizations doing work in the CEE/FSU region, using it to find potential grantees and partners.

The Centers for Pluralism initiated and inspired several models. The main CFP grant program itself was a model for NGO development: in nearly all cases, support grants for 24 Centers for Pluralism helped these organizations expand, later become self-sufficient through direct grants of the NED and other donors, and assist other organizations within their countries. The CFP small grant program has provided nearly 200 grants of between \$200 and \$2,700, giving needed help to both emerging and established organizations, especially those outside capital cities, to carry out important in-country and cross-border projects. They have ranged from a grant for Liga Pro Europa's College of Democracy to support for the transborder forum in Batumi carried out by the IDP Women's Association, from a grant to the *Worker* newspaper in Belarus to publish three issues around the time of elections to a cross-border conference on civic education in the Ferghana Valley involving activists from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. When introduced by IDEE, such grants were rare; today they have become the model for the region.

Similarly, the study tour and exchange program of IDEE, introduced in 1993, has provided an important means for more than one hundred democratic activists to exchange information and to gain a deeper knowledge of the work and situation of their counterparts in other countries. This, in turn, allowed activists to compare and learn from different countries in the region. No organization has taken more advantage of this program than the Inam Center for Pluralism. Building on CFP programs, it has raised additional funds for a total of several hundred interactive study tours and exchanges, bringing CFP lecturers to Azerbaijan for workshops with local civic



Hungarian MP Jozsef Szajer with Cuban opposition leader Felix Bonne Carcasses, in 1996. Bonne was sentenced to four years in prison soon afterwards as one of the four signers of the "Cuba Is for All" Proclamation. Jozsef Szajer went to Cuba with Irena Lasota on one of the first exchanges in an IDEE-organized program sponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy bringing East European opposition veterans to the island to meet their counterparts. The program was inspired by the cross-border cooperation of the Centers for Pluralism.

Credit: IDEE

activists and sending key and emerging leaders to Belarus, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Serbia. Inam's director, Vahid Gazi, in his article "The Mission is Not Yet Accomplished," describes their importance. But there are other important examples: the exchange for Georgian CfPs to the Czech Republic helped provide important insight on its constitution and legislation, especially its lustration law; the Belarusan-Serbian exchange of CfPs helped these organizations compare and contrast their countries' movements for democracy; the exchange of the IDP Association in Georgia with the Crimean Teachers' Council shared information on the organization of youth reconciliation camps on the one side and the development of Parent Teacher Associations on the other.

The Meetings of the Centers for Pluralism are perhaps the most important part of the CfP program: it brings together all the members of the Network in one setting in order to discuss common problems, issues, and solutions for bringing about a democratic transformation for the whole region. They also combine elements of the CfP study tours, since each meeting is an opportunity for all the participants to learn about a new country. And each meeting introduces new members to the CfP community. As noted, there have been 18 full meetings and 9 regional meetings of the Centers for Pluralism. The first meeting in Warsaw in 1993 had twenty-five participants from ten countries; the last full meeting, the 18th, had more than 80 participants from twenty-one countries.

The meetings have been held throughout the region in part to integrate as many Centers for Pluralism as possible into the Network and in part to expose all of the participants to different situations in different countries having different historical, cultural, and social circumstances. The list of cities is impressive: Baku, Belgrade, Brasov, Bratislava, Bucharest, Budapest, Eupatoria, Lviv, Minsk, Tallinn, Tbilisi, Tirgu Mures, Tuzla, Vilnius, Warsaw, among others. Each host Center for Pluralism presented its own theme, whether it was exploring the self-government movement of the Crimean Tatar people, to the quick exit from communism offered by Estonia, to the theme of multiculturalism in Tirgu Mures and Tuzla, and the issue of multinationalism in Lviv. CfP meetings were generally not events for "important people," meaning for us people with titles. We did not have obligatory guests from government, parliament, or society; we never invited Ambassadors or other foreign dignitaries. We wished to discuss important issues. Still, important figures, representing a broad range of democratic thought, came because they wished to participate and contribute: President Vytautas Landsbergis in Vilnius, Mustafa Djemilev, MP and chairman of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis, in Eupatoria and Baku, Isa Gambar, the head of the Azerbaijan democratic opposition in Baku, M.P. Jozsef Szajer, for ten years the head of the Fidesz parliamentary caucus in Hungary, future president Emil Constantinescu in Bucharest, former prime minister of Bulgaria, Philip Dimitrov, among many others.

From these meetings came all of the CfP's important cross-border initiatives: Schools for Young Political Leaders, exchanges and study tours, NGO training programs, civic education programs, solidarity campaigns, newsletters. IDEE itself drew on the CfPs and CfP meetings for all of its other programs. It appealed to its members to find participants for the four groundbreaking symposia on nationalism and decommunisation, for starting the Civic Bridges programs in Yugoslavia, for the Women's Networking Programs in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the Community Building Through Tourism program in western Ukraine and Crimea. It has also been the basis for collaboration on a number of training manuals and civic education materials in a wide range of countries.

Together, the Centers for Pluralism and partner organizations that contribute to the CfP program form a unique regional network that is described in the twelve chapters of this ten year anniversary publication. In each of the chapters, the authors describe the basis for the network and its importance to their work. What is clear from reading them is how interactive and value-based this network is. Other networks, it is made clear, are not based on equal participation and openness, but rather on imposed priorities and controlled agendas. The Centers for Pluralism Network remains a unique contribution to the democratic movement in a strategic region of the world.

Today, the Centers for Pluralism program is in jeopardy. For ten years, it was generously funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, but in 2003 NED funding stopped and IDEE has yet to raise replacement funding.

It is clear from the articles in this book that the Centers for Pluralism has made a serious contribution to the development of democracy movements. But, while the authors of this volume speak of successes, it is also clear, as one contributor writes, that the mission of the Centers for Pluralism is "not yet accomplished," not only in stabilizing and institutionalizing democratic gains but also – and especially – in assisting civic and democratic movements struggling against the region's persistent and unfortunately numerous dictatorships and semi-authoritarian regimes. The need for the Centers for Pluralism and similar programs is expressed by another author in a single plea, "H E L P !"

Finally, there is another role that the Centers for Pluralism looks for: assisting their colleagues in other, less regionally contiguous, communist and "former" communist regimes. As Gabriel Andreescu, Alexander Podrabinek, and others relate, the Centers for Pluralism has played an active role in supporting Cuban democrats and their struggle against the Castro dictatorship. Podrabinek's Prima Human Rights News Agency is a voice for the repressed in many communist, former communist, and other dictatorships. The activists in the CfP Network believe they have a great deal of experience to share with their colleagues.