

Cuban Embassy chanting “Freedom for Cuba!”, “Free the Prisoners of Conscience!”, and other slogans. In 2001, Javier returned to Romania with a different goal. It took place after a meeting of the Centers for Pluralism, organized by IDEE, where an annual award was created in support of the Cuban dissidents. It was the first ever award dedicated to Castro’s opponents. It was only from 2002 on that the opponents who risked their lives or imprisonment in Cuba for their activity would enjoy, among other prizes and awards, true international recognition.

The Award was named after a Cuban hero who died in a communist prison in 1972 during a hunger strike meant to change conditions of incarceration. “The Pedro Louis Boitel Award Network of Eastern European Countries” was created and provided an award of \$1,500.

In 2001, the winner of the Pedro Louis Boitel Award was Juan Carlos Lebya, a blind dissident. The ceremony organized in Bucharest was turned by Directorio into an exceptional event. Radio Marti announced the award every day for a month. The name of the winner was to be announced on May 25, the day Boitel died. The ceremony was also broadcast live in Cuba. On May 25, the information was on the air every hour. I was able to have a live radio talk show with Directorio in Miami and Juan Carlos Lebya himself, who was brought to Havana, on a phone that was not intercepted by Cuban security.

In 2002, the ceremony took place in Miami, since it corresponded with the celebration of Cuba’s century of independence. This time, the award went to Angel Moyo Acosta, a 37-year-old Cuban worker who had founded the Alternative Option Independent Movement.

Anticommunist activists in Romania and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe showed a high level of solidarity with their Cuban colleagues. For some of them, the transition, a complex yet dull period, does not live up to their dreams “to change the world.” The creation of the Pedro Louis Boitel Award, dedicated to people who risk everything in their fight for liberty, but more so the creation of a solidarity network for Cuba itself, gave them a new sense of action.

All of this could not have happened without the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe and the Centers for Pluralism. Nor without IDEE’s leaders, Irena Lasota and Eric Chenoweth, who combined efficiency with the true spirit of activism for democracy.



*The Romanian Centers for Pluralism: Luminita Petrescu, president of the Foundation for Pluralism, at the 2nd Regional Meeting of Centers for Pluralism of Southeastern Europe, hosted in January 2002 by the Foundation in Timisoara, Romania.*

## 10 Years of Networking – A Success Story

by Agu Laius



*Agu Laius, director of the Jaan Tõnisson Institute, with Irena Lasota, right, JTI coordinator Tiiu Evert, and Jakub Karpiński at the 4th Centers for Pluralism Meeting, held in Tallinn, Estonia. Credit: IDEE*

*Agu Laius is director of the Jaan Tõnisson Institute, in Tallinn, Estonia, and the first chairman of the Estonian NGO Roundtable.*

The Jaan Tõnisson Institute was established in 1991 with the aim of fostering democratic processes in Estonian society. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, democratic state institutions were lacking and the Estonian economy was facing a serious crisis, especially since large military factories had stopped functioning. Although independence was restored mainly through massive civic organizations such as the Popular Front, the Association for Cultural Heritage, the Green Movement, and Estonian citizen committees, nevertheless Estonia lacked diverse and numerous non-governmental or civic organizations, a so-called third sector.

In addition, during the 50 years of Soviet rule, the composition of the population living on Estonian territory had significantly changed, creating serious tensions within the society. Not everyone in the country had stood up for the Republic of Estonia and after restoring its independence the issue of acquiring Estonian citizenship became an issue of passionate debates. Because Estonia’s independence was restored on the principled basis of the legal continuity of the state that existed until 1940, the pre-occupation Act of Citizenship was also restored. But the people who came to Estonia during the Soviet period demanded a so-called zero-version of citizenship, that is to automatically granting citizenship to every person living in Estonia in the moment of the restoration of independence. The population of Estonia was also divided by language: nearly 40 percent of the population could speak only in Russian and did not communicate in Estonian. In the northeastern part of Estonia, Russian-only speakers formed a majority.

Clearly, there were difficult problems that had to be faced after the restoration of independence. There were no skills, structures, or experience

for solving them. The Jaan Tõnisson Institute, established in such conditions, also lacked experience even to arrange its work. It had no contacts, not to mention any possible cooperation, with foreign NGOs. We made the best effort we could and today we can say that no large mistakes were made.

Happily, Irena Lasota wished to make the Institute's acquaintance. Our first meeting took place in 1992 and we had an open and rather long discussion. At this moment, my English was very poor but we did realize that many of our views were alike. Later, we found out that Irena was establishing a new network of cooperation for Central and Eastern European NGOs – called Centers for Pluralism – at the initiative of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe.

During the first Centers for Pluralism Meeting in Warsaw in March 1993, NGOs sharing the same viewpoints had gathered from all the East Central European and later from most every postcommunist country. We started communicating and started to realize how similar our problems were, that we lacked the sufficient experience of managing and organizing NGOs, and that therefore we could not effectively participate in the democratization processes of our countries.

From the start of the CfP Network, we had the possibility to discuss regularly the developments in our countries and to exchange our experiences. We regularly met experts from Western countries who attended the meetings, as well as representatives of foreign donors, who introduced possibilities for applying for funding. Personal contacts play an important role in creating mutual trust between NGOs and funders. However, a small NGO from Estonia lacked any opportunity of making such contacts without outside support. Thanks to the meetings of the Centers for Pluralism taking place twice a year, we could discuss specific projects with the representatives of foreign funders, introduce the situation in our country, and explain why some project was important for us at that very moment.

The CfP Meetings played a key role in creating and developing the international relations of the Jaan Tõnisson Institute. Without the CfP network it would be difficult to imagine how time-consuming it would have been to make such contacts. The participation in the CfP network had another positive effect: since international funders trusted IDEE, their trust instantly broadened to the organizations of the network. At CfP Meetings, we could also express our expectations and needs and explain how IDEE could help the democratization processes in Central and Eastern Europe. For many years, an important journal was published, *Uncaptive Minds*, the *Centers for Pluralism Newsletter* was started, and a number of regional events took place. Through such activities, the CfPs became a close and effective network of cooperation for NGOs.

The CfP network also plays a significant role in giving the representatives of NGOs from newly independent countries a very good overview of the developments in other countries with a similar background. During CfP

events, we often had meetings with top politicians of the host countries who talked about their understanding of politics and the possible paths of development in the country. In short, the most energetic exchange of thoughts and experiences took place.

It must be noted that CfP Meetings have always been characterized by informality. Despite the hard work accomplished in the meeting's agendas, a great deal of exchange of experiences and development of ideas occurred outside the formal program, often late in the evening and instead of a good night's sleep.

Participation in the CfP Network significantly helped the JTI in establishing an NGO Center in Estonia where we could speak about the relevance of NGOs, explain their role and functions in society, share our experiences, organize training for the directors of NGOs, and help them with know how. From this center, the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (NENO) emerged. It is now independent but still deals with similar problems.

At CfP Meetings, we had very serious discussions for years about the relations between NGOs and politics, to what extent must or can we be political, how much should we interfere in the political processes of the country, to what extent can and must we involve the NGOs of other countries and the world in general. It is difficult to reach a united viewpoint and in fact it is still lacking. In many autocratic countries where democratic freedoms were limited, it seemed perhaps that NGOs were too much involved in politics, taking active part in election campaign, putting up their own candidates, and establishing democratic alliances. In some countries, such as Estonia, democratization of society was achieved rather quickly and NGOs working in such countries more easily learned the roles and functions of NGOs characteristic of Western democracies. At the same time, we must bear in mind that the restoration of independence in Estonia was precisely due to the key role of large civic associations with huge membership. Fast democratic reforms after the restoration of independence forced civic associations to return to their statutory goals. Political movements, such as the Popular Front, were reformed into political parties.

In the countries that remained undemocratic, everything was different: it was almost impossible for NGOs to have just a traditional role. The necessary democratic guarantees were missing and their large intervention in political affairs blurred over the essential role of NGOs, not only in the eyes of Western democracies but within the country itself.

These arguments, sometimes even quite emotional, brought us to a meeting of similar minds concerning both our behavior and further steps. We reached a definite understanding that NGOs cannot and may not stay away from politics, that they cannot lose their ability to influence political processes, and that they must be active and promote civic participation in politics. Differences of opinions remained mainly in the methods used.

The countries that quickly took a democratic path also faced the problems. The foreign aid received at the beginning of the 1990s helped them build a diverse structure of NGOs. They were found in every field of activity where there was the slightest space and need. However, fast democratization and economic success also meant that foreign foundations withdrew support from NGOs in Estonia earlier, leaving the country or simply setting new priorities of action. The funders hoped that the Estonian state could already bear this burden. Unfortunately our politicians and public officials had a different idea. The state was not willing or prepared to support its NGOs or even cooperate with them.

Therefore we were faced with another challenge where we had to start energetically influencing politicians to change their attitude towards NGOs and the idea of civil society in general. The first attempts to communicate with politicians and raise their awareness of the need to assist the third sector completely failed. The NGO representatives were told to do what they wanted but not to disturb the public authorities. NGOs were seen as money wasters and problem makers in the society. They never received any financial support from the state and were definite outsiders in the decision-making processes.

Obviously, we needed to act much more systematically and powerfully if we wished to change the attitudes of society and politicians. At the initiative of NENO, we started a project for elaborating how relations between public authorities and NGOs in Estonia should be arranged. We developed the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept (<http://www.emy.ee/alusdokumendid/concept.html>) and gave it for approval to the Estonian Parliament. Parliament was not ready to discuss such a concept, however. We had to begin educating politicians and convincing them that while many long-term democracies do not formally adopt such a concept, they work precisely according to the principles we had written down. We were supported by the experiences of Great Britain, Canada, and many other countries where similar relations between the state and NGO sector are elaborated in such documents. It took one and a half years of hard work before we managed to convince politicians of the importance of the civil society concept for democracy of Estonia. As a result, the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept was unanimously adopted in parliament. The document has a lot of perspective. It guarantees the cooperation between the Estonian Government and civil society organizations beginning in 2003. Together they should start solving problems that are challenging the sustainability of NGOs in the country.

During the process of getting the concept adopted, a problem became apparent. Public authorities claimed that they would be willing to negotiate with us all the time, but it is impossible given the more than 18,000 NGOs in the country. They wished for a partner, an acknowledged representative council of civil society organizations to negotiate with. And of course, they offered us a hieratic structure, very characteristic of public authorities. We opposed it

and elaborated more democratic principles of civil society representation by establishing the Estonian NGO Roundtable. It is an open and broad form of cooperation where annual General Assemblies are held electing a 33-member Representative Council. Its first meeting in February 2001 included representatives of 428 NGOs. State authorities did not support the idea of the Estonian Roundtable but within just two years the Estonian NGO Roundtable has become the acknowledged representative of NGO interests by civil society and public structures. (For more details, see: <http://www.emy.ee>.)

Like many other Central and Eastern European countries, Estonia has reached the accession point with the European Union. They have reached the path of stable development. NGOs working in these countries and our long cooperation through the CfP network have played a significant role.

Unfortunately we must also admit that during the 10 years of the CfP network differences have grown among us. Many countries have been successful in the democratization process, whereas in many developments stopped or in some cases conditions became worse. Hence the CfP network needs a thorough re-interpretation. The EU accession countries together with their NGOs should start helping the others more. The key importance lies in the NGOs which so far worked side by side through the CfP network. Such a proposition should be made to the EU structures.

By its name, IDEE should be limited to Europe. The widening of participants to the CfP network have indeed offered many interesting contacts but also probably decreased its effectiveness. Again and again we start our discussions from the beginning and from topics which have already been discussed and argued years ago. I do not exclude the possible separate branches of CfP Europe, CfP Asia and, why not, CfP America. However, the development of one region – Europe – needs a purposeful completion where in the end we can say: in Europe there are only democratic societies and countries.

*In February 2001, 428 representatives of Estonia's third sector came together to form the Estonia Roundtable of Non-Profit Organizations, an "open and broad form of cooperation . . . [and] the acknowledged representative of NGO interests both by civil society and the government." Its code of ethics for NGOs (in its brochure) has become a model for the region.*



## The Network of Independent Journalists

by Stojan Obradoviæ and Eric Chenoweth

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*Stojan Obradoviæ at the offices of STINA Press Agency, in Split, Croatia. Credit: IDEE*

The Network of Independent Journalists (NIJ) was founded in 1993 by the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe as a means of fostering greater cross-border reporting by independent newspapers and publications in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In this way, IDEE wanted to help to break through the entrenched insularity of postcommunist countries.

The need was clear. After the events of 1989-1991, there was surprisingly little cross-border coverage of the historic events in Eastern Europe in the region's own media. Even today, more than a decade later, many independent newspapers and agencies wanting to cover events in postcommunist countries still must rely on reporting from state-run or semi-official press agencies, since very few independent media can afford their own correspondents or to use expensive Western wire services. This is especially the case still in the former Soviet Union, where much of the media space is still state dominated, but not only. As a result, readers are unable to find accurate reporting, much less independent analysis, on issues affecting postcommunist countries in general and thus have had little if any information of how other countries in the region may be addressing problems similar to their own.

At first, the NIJ was distributed in individual articles through the *Centers for Pluralism Newsletter* and in individual emails. In 1994, IDEE looked for a more organized distribution of articles using the new opportunities of the

internet. STINA News Agency had rich experience in utilizing the internet for cross border projects in the Balkans. STINA had begun as a news agency of the former Yugoslav republics, with the aim of providing independent and accurate reporting in the face of nationalist pro-war media.

STINA and IDEE had met already in several seminars on media and journalism organized by IDEE, the World Press Freedom Committee, and their partners in the region. So, in the summer of 1994, after listening to Irena Lasota describe the project at a conference in Bratislava organized by the Milan Simecka Foundation, a member of the Centers for Pluralism Network, we were happy to embrace the NIJ idea. We began establishing our first contacts with NIJ reporters and started organizing distribution of their articles as part of the STINA service. After the Centers for Pluralism meeting in Tallinn, Estonia in October 1994, Eric Chenoweth and Irena Lasota traveled to Split, Croatia and formally asked STINA to be the coordinator of the Network of Independent Journalists as well as to cooperate with IDEE's quarterly journal *Uncaptive Minds*. (The journal's next issue featured an article on Croatia's embattled *Feral Tribune*.) Since that time, STINA has been coordinating this exciting and unique project.

For more than eight years, the NIJ has provided the region's independent newspapers and news magazines with access to regular, up-to-date, and accurate coverage by leading journalists from the region covering nearly all post-communist countries. Until 1996, NIJ distributed individual articles. In 1997, NIJ was transformed into a regular weekly service with four to five analytical articles in each issue. In the past six years, the *NIJ Weekly Service* has developed a broad network and foundation both for providing high-quality reporting and analysis and for distribution to the region's independent media. We believe this foundation provides the basis for both continued qualitative service and quantitative growth. Indeed, the use of its texts and the interest of new journalists who wish to contribute to the *NIJ Weekly Service* has continuously increased. Its articles have been used by, among other publications and media outlets, *525-ci* and *Azadlyg* in Azerbaijan, *Naša Naviny* (formerly *Svaboda*) in Belarus, *Oslobodjenje* in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Demokratiya* in Bulgaria, *Novi List* in Croatia, *Lidové Noviny* in the Czech Republic, *Eesty Aeg* in Estonia, *Magyar Narancs* in Hungary *Koha Ditore* in Kosovo, *Puls* in Macedonia, *Monitor* in Montenegro, *Rzeczpospolita* in Poland, *Monitorul* and *22 Magazine* in Romania, *Vreme* in Serbia, *Sme* in Slovakia, and *Dnevnik* in Slovenia.

The *NIJ Weekly Service* has published 321 issues with a total of about 1,200 articles. While it has not had the ability to track use of its articles exactly, we estimate from reports we have received that each article on average has

been republished three to four times, or 12 to 16 republished articles per issue. The NIJ has covered 35 countries and special regions of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, including: Albania, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina (both the Federation and the Serb Republic), Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, the Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (including Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo), as well as special regions of Abkhazia, Chechnya, Crimea, Dagestan, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The NIJ has also had special coverage of the democratic opposition in Cuba.

The NIJ is the only network relying exclusively on journalists and analysts from the region covering the important issues affecting the entire post-communist area. Overall, 80 journalists from 30 countries have contributed to the *Weekly Service*. They include some of the top independent journalists and analysts from each of the countries – Mustafa Hajibeli from Azerbaijan, Paweł Bykausky from Belarus, Peter Karaboev from Bulgaria, Arkady Dubnov covering Central Asia, Petruška Šustrová from Czech Republic, Valery Kalabugin from Estonia, Ivlian Haindrava from Georgia, Asylbek Ismailov from Kyrgyzstan, Pauls Raudseps from Latvia, Slobodan Rackovic from Montenegro, Alexander Podrabinek from Russia, and Jakub Karpiński from Poland.

In the past period, there was special attention paid to conflict areas in East Europe and the former Soviet Union (the Caucasus, Balkans, Central Asia). Other areas of interest have been topical issues relating to postcommunist transformation to democracy, such as national and local elections, the development of civil society, minority rights and ethnic relations, problems of pri-



*Ten years of sharing information and analysis across borders.*

vatization and corruption, minority and human rights, media freedom, relations among CEE countries, and questions of NATO expansion.

Significantly, the NIJ focuses interest on ignored areas like the Crimea, where ethnic Crimean Tatars are dealing with conflict, discrimination, and economic and social difficulties through nonviolent means.

The NIJ *Weekly Service* has remained free of charge to most users, the only way in which most independent media in the postcommunist region could have access to the NIJ's circulation of high quality articles. Such coverage would be considered standard in more established and wealthy Western media, which have access to their own correspondents or can use high-priced wire services. But absent a service like the NIJ, such coverage is inaccessible to most independent media in the postcommunist region. More importantly, the NIJ offers in-depth analyses by some of the region's best reporters, people with on-the-ground insight into the events of their country, unlike foreign reporters who spend limited time in a place or region.

The NIJ is distributed to more than 300 recipients (media, NGOs, international organizations, research and educational institutions, etc.) in 40 countries. As a result of the NIJ, there has been a clear increase in cross-border coverage in independent media in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The regular republication of articles by many news outlets has given East European readers a broader coverage of events in the region and a larger understanding of postcommunist transitions.

The NIJ's quality is found in both its analytical background and its on-time reporting. NIJ's *Weekly Service* is at the top of the line with other specialized projects covering transitional processes. It ensures the circulation of different ideas and experiences of transitional processes in post-totalitarian societies, and perhaps more importantly, it allows for the evaluation of democratization processes and an awareness of deviations and manipulations that present governments in these countries use to cover up often repeated undemocratic behavior and practices.

The NIJ has also had a very important role in strengthening ties of independent journalists and newspapers and enhancing their professionalism, both to better serve their readers and to more effectively build a free and democratic media. In the initial years, IDEE sponsored meetings of NIJ contributors in order to strengthen the network and *Weekly Service* – in Bucharest, Tirgu Mures, and Bratislava. Since then, journalists and editors have called on NIJ and IDEE to provide contacts and suggestions for journalists, while journalists look to us for contacts in other countries.

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.