

An Open Window to the East

by Petruška Šustrová

Petruška Šustrová is an independent journalist, former editor of Lidové Noviny, and winner of the prestigious Karel Havlíček Borovský Award for exceptional journalism in 1999. Before 1989, she was a spokesperson of the Charter 77 movement and member of the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS).



Petruška Šustrová at the 18th Meeting of the Centers for Pluralism. Credit: IDEE

The history of my contacts with the Centers for Pluralism is a long one and long histories are best recounted from the beginning, so I shall start at the beginning.

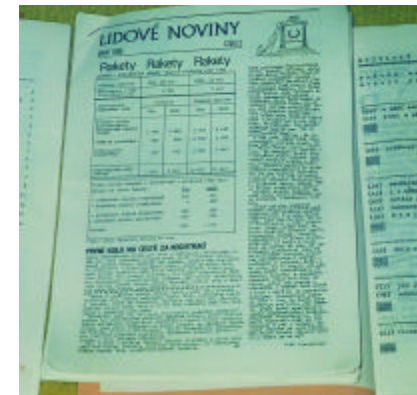
I got to know Irena Lasota and Eric Chenoweth long before the establishment of the Centers for Pluralism. Sometime at the beginning of 1988, two foreigners, a man and a woman, rang at my door. I did not feel in the least like conducting a conversation in a foreign language and I secretly hoped that the visitors would go away once they realized that they could not have much of a conversation with me in English or in French.

But everything turned out quite differently. I conversed with the woman visitor in Russian, while after a while my husband talked to both visitors in English. After a chat lasting several hours and covering a whole spectrum of political problems, the two people went away and ever since I have considered them to be my friends. During those few hours I discovered that Eric and Irena really understood the situation behind the Iron Curtain, that they knew the facts, that they were capable of imagining themselves in our position and understanding it while also bringing their own experiences into the discussion. And those were the kind of experiences which neither I (nor most of my friends) were able to grasp in the late 1980s. I had never experienced life in the free world. I was born and grew up in Czechoslovakia and until 1989 I was always refused a passport. Up to that time I had never experienced a discussion on politics that was based on a thorough knowledge of the latest specialized literature, analyses, or debates that at the time were absolutely unobtainable in Czechoslovakia.

The meeting impressed me deeply also because I did not feel the slightest handicap; the visitors were clearly interested in what we thought about the current situation and about the future, and it was evident that they took us seriously. Irena took a photograph of *samizdat* publications, which we spread out on the bed for her to see, and when the first issue of the magazine *Uncaptive Minds* reached us after some time we found the photograph in it. And that was not all: the text introducing the Czechoslovak section in the magazine ended by quoting a former spokesman of the Charter, who was reported to say: “We are not waiting for Gorbachev. He wants economic reform; but without democracy, even this is impossible. And if he allowed the real truth to be told about the system, it would collapse.” These were my words and I was moved and pleased that my visitors had quoted me since, after all they had visited a number of more distinguished members of the opposition during their visit to Czechoslovakia at that time.

Apart from this, I found interesting information in *Uncaptive Minds* about Poland and Hungary, and though my knowledge of English was far worse than it is today, I made every effort to plod through the texts. I was convinced that Eric, Irena and their associates had prepared the issue of *Uncaptive Minds* precisely for people like myself. The same applied to subsequent issues of *Uncaptive Minds*, which someone had smuggled to Prague: it had become my magazine. Irena Lasota paid several more visits to Prague and brought us money to help us issue *samizdat* publications. But her questions and her accounts on what was happening elsewhere were equally important for me.

When communism was collapsing in Czechoslovakia after November 17, 1989, some friends and I set up the Independent Press Centre. Starting on November 20, it issued a daily information bulletin, which later turned into the weekly *Respekt*. I was preparing for my new profession as a journalist but before that I had to make one significant diversion. In April 1990, Jan Ruml, a fellow dissident who from one day to the next was appointed First Deputy Federal Minister of Interior, asked me to come and work at the Ministry as an adviser.



The photo of underground Czech publications that appeared in the first issue of Uncaptive Minds in 1988. Credit: IDEE

Those were quite exceptional times and exceptional conditions. Ruml and I sat down in an office and together we planned how to demolish the old State Security (secret police) and how to create a new security service to replace the old one, one that would not hunt for genuine or invented opponents of the regime but rather compile and evaluate information important for the security of the state. In the autumn of 1990 I was appointed Deputy Minister and remained in this post until the summer of 1991.

During that period I met Irena Lasota several times but when she told me about her plans regarding a network of non-governmental organizations, all this sounded a bit remote to me: as a civil servant I naturally did not intend to set up non-governmental organizations, and I had simply no time to think of what would happen once I left the Ministry of the Interior.

Early in 1991, I received an invitation to attend an international conference at Timisoara; Irena was driving to the conference from Paris together with Jakub Karpinski. She suggested stopping over in Prague and taking me along. I naturally agreed. By a coincidence of circumstances, Irena and Jakub arrived in Prague on the eve of the day the so-called Commission of November 17 presented its final report to Parlia-



Petruška Šustrová speaking at the Moscow Symposium on Postcommunism, organized by IDEE and Express-Khronika. Jakub Karpinski on her left and Polish opposition veteran and historian Karol Modzelewski on her right. Credit: IDEE

ment. The report examined the background of the brutal repression of the student demonstration of November 17, 1989, which sparked the mass protests that brought down the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. In the course of its investigation, the parliamentary commission discovered that former agents of the communist secret police were among members of Parliament; the deputies decided to suggest to these people to resign their public office. The deputies resolved to publish the names of those members of Parliament who were listed in the archives of the secret police as secret agents but who declined to resign their mandate. And to make the publication of the names even more effective, the national television broadcast the presentation of the final report in a live report.

I shall never forget how Irena, Jakub, and I watched television for some two hours as history was being made on the screen before our very eyes. It all appeared symbolic to me but at the same time almost natural because we had frequently discussed the secret service with Irena and Jakub. After that we set out on a journey to Hungary and across the Romanian border to Timisoara.

My visit to Timisoara taught me an important lesson. At the beginning of February 1991, the city still showed signs of the battles fought there in December 1989. There was nothing to buy in the shops and in my hotel room there was no more than one bulb for six fixtures. When I asked for another bulb at the hotel reception, the receptionist said she could not give me another one with the explanation that the guests were stealing them. An endless queue was outside the one and only store in the city that sold meat 24 hours a day. The people standing there told us that they had to stand and wait the whole day and throughout the night.

Coming from relatively well-supplied Czechoslovakia, this was something I could not even imagine. And I was convinced that my friends and acquaintances, too, could not imagine such a thing, just as people who had not seen this for themselves. Of course, the Czech media had told me that there were shortages in Romania, yet I never dreamt that the term shortages meant 24-hour-long queues. But for people there, this was nothing new. I have not forgotten that experience.

I left the Ministry of Interior early in 1992 since the state security had been abolished – the Orwellian Ministry of Love ceased to exist. This was the end of my work in the civil service; I did not intend to be an office worker forever and so I returned to my work as a journalist. And this history finally brings me to explain what the chance of participating in meetings of the Centers for Pluralism meant for me.

In actual fact, I did not really belong at the Centers for Pluralism meetings. I did not work in a non-profit organization but I was most grateful to the organizers, and above all to Irena and Eric, for nevertheless giving me the opportunity to attend meetings of the Centers for Pluralism.

This was no tourism experience but a real school of knowledge. At each meeting it became more and more evident to me how close all the people I met there were to me. Our destinies were as near to each other as those of our countries. The meetings were arranged in such a way that in only a few days I discovered more about the country where we were meeting than after weeks of study. By writing about everything I learned and discovered at the meetings, I am convinced that I made a contribution to the transformation of Czech society and its knowledge after communism.

The bonds of friendship that I forged with other participants at the meetings became a commitment for me. I was eager to convey to my Czech fellow citizens everything about the countries so dear to my friends and that I, too, had fallen in love with. This intention could appear commonplace but I am aware of the mistrust a large proportion of Czechs feel for foreigners and especially foreigners from the East. I wanted to demonstrate to them that despite the post-communist backwardness of many countries and their host of serious problems, the people living there had the same experiences under communism, read the same books, saw the same films, and worried and rejoiced in the same way as we did.

It was only in the course of gatherings and meetings of the Centers for Pluralism that I became aware of how little we in the post-communist world knew about each other and how an extensive exchange of information between our countries could play not only an enlightening and educative role, but also a most practical one. After all, there are not so many paths leading away from communism and their pitfalls resemble each other like two eggs. If we know what happened wrong yesterday in the country of our neighbours, we could tomorrow avert the same problem.

After 1989, the Czech media give very little attention to foreign, especially to post-communist countries. The journalists on the Czech scene who do pay attention to these countries are an exception. I remember when, in the autumn of 1996, I found out that the next meeting of the CfP would take place in Crimea and that once it was over I could fly to Moscow to attend an IDEE-organized conference on post-communist transitions. I went out of my editorial office and exclaimed to my colleagues: I am going to Yevpatoria and Moscow! They stared at me in

total disbelief until one of them finally told me only an idiot would want to go to countries where nothing is working and where there is no comfort. Isn't it far better to travel to the West? I understood that I lived in a world that was different from his.

During the meeting at Yevpatoria, the organizers, who were Crimean Tatars, took us to the site of a future Tatar housing development. It was early evening, there was a mild drizzle and it was getting dark. We stopped at a muddy road across a field and we were in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but fields; an outline of a building under construction could be seen in the dusk. Aydir, our guide, told us with great enthusiasm that a suburb, called Ben Izmail, would grow up at the place where we were standing. And can you see that building over there? That will be the mosque. It all sounded unbelievable.

Six months later we again met Aydir at a CfP meeting in a different country. He proudly showed me a photograph depicting a vast room with only part of a roof. In one corner there were wooden boards, in another corner several barefoot men were kneeling down and praying, their backs facing the camera. That is our mosque, Aydir said. It is hard to explain the deep impression the photograph made on me. I remembered only too well the path leading nowhere at the time and where your feet sank deep into the mud on that grim rainy evening.

At the meeting of the CfP in Romania in the autumn of 1999, our Georgian friends told us that parliamentary elections were planned in their country and that their organization was looking for volunteers who would like to act as international observers. I put my name down and a few weeks later I was able to see for myself how people went to vote in the Caucasus. The number of election frauds that I myself saw in Batumi left me stunned. But I was staggered when I subsequently heard an assessment by international observers who claimed that the elections had been a step towards democracy!

I was present also the next year at the elections in Azerbaijan as an international observer sent by IDEE, and my experience there was very similar. Some 8 percent of all registered voters came to the polling station where I sat the whole day, from morning until late at night. How was I to believe that the total number of voters throughout the country had in fact reached 52.5 percent as claimed by the Azerbaijani authorities?

However, I do understand why international observers inevitably fail in their mission and are unable to discover all the swindles that occur at elections in the Caucasus. Of course, I, like most international observers, do not speak either Georgian or Azeri. I have only one life and I will definitely not manage to learn the languages of all the countries I have come

to love through the meetings of the Centers for Pluralism. If I had to rely only on the authorities it would be possible to deceive me just like other international observers. But I am at a great advantage compared to them: I do not come to a strange country. My colleagues and friends in the non-governmental organizations explain to me in great detail all the characteristics of the parties putting up candidates, who represents them, and what their attitude is to the current regime. In the polling station, I meet other observers and we help each other in the course of that long day of voting and we take each other's place. Moreover, the local observers realize that I am no total stranger, that I know some of the local people and that my interest in their country is not simply official. These matters are most important.

I was glad to have had the chance of observing these elections since that made me feel that I was able to repay, at least in part, the debt I feel towards the Centers for Pluralism. But I believe that my commentaries about the elections in the Caucasus were significant also for my Czech fellow citizens. Czechs are frequently unhappy about the conditions that prevail in their country; they love to complain about all sorts of things. They now just take for granted that in the Czech Republic elections are held under quite regular conditions. The idea that this is not something that can be taken for granted has perhaps made some readers aware that the state of democracy in the Czech lands may not be as bad as is often claimed.

When I try to sum up all this, I must admit that my incorporation into the CfP Network has significantly changed my life. Up until my involvement, I did not really take much of an interest in the post-communist countries with the exception of Poland, whereas now they form part of my journalistic specialization; certainly, the possibility of making comparisons has greatly enhanced my journalistic criteria. The Eastern countries are not merely new topics to write about; understanding them gives me a far better understanding of all that is taking place around me. Had I not attended the meetings of the Centers for Pluralism, I would never have thought of making documentary films for Czech television about Georgia or Romania and no one would have entrusted the job to me.

I have gained a great deal of personal satisfaction through the Centers for Pluralism. I am convinced that the network of CfPs succeeded in bringing exceptional human beings closer together, people with a profound feeling for freedom, democracy, and pluralism. It is an honor for me to regard them as my friends and it gives me great pleasure and teaches me important lessons to be able to continue to have discussions with them through the Centers for Pluralism.

IDEE and Romania

by Gabriel Andreescu



Gabriel Andreescu at the 18th Meeting of the Centers for Pluralism in April 2003. Credit: IDEE

Gabriel Andreescu is director of the Association for the Defense of Human Rights of Romania-Helsinki Committee (APADOR-CH).

With the passing of time, there is a considerable decrease in the impact of interventions on a society that has undergone revolution. Few analysts of the transition in Eastern Europe seem to recognize the importance of this fact. But this statement is certainly true when speaking about the changes that have taken place in Romania since the end of 1989. Until then, this country, led by Ceausescu's clique, had not known the meaning of civil society. The power vacuum created immediately after the revolution triggered, in its turn, various opportunities in the competition for leadership. As a consequence, even small initiatives could influence substantially the chain of events.

It was the moment for the West to get directly involved in building a political structure for Romanian society. The West, it is true, sent in a lot of humanitarian aid. It took years, however, for leading foundations to investigate and define a program to support civil society and, more generally, the political arena. There were, however, some activists and NGOs who landed at the Bucharest airport in the first weeks of January 1990, bringing along the know-how for building a democratic society, activists such as Jeri Laber, the executive director of Helsinki Watch. The meetings she had at that time led to the creation of the Association for the Defense of Human Rights of Romania-Helsinki Committee (APADOR-CH), without which the history of human rights in Romania would be totally different.

Also in 1990, riding the first wave of democratic assistance, Irena Lasota came to Bucharest. A veteran opposition activist, Lasota left Poland for France and then the US, where she co-founded the Committee in Support of Solidarity and then the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE). As the name

shows, IDEE was an organization with very general goals and fields of action. I discovered later those IDEE members were activists in the old “American tradition” of the frontier, helping push forward the frontline of democracy. This time, the frontier followed the falling communist dictators. As soon as contacts were possible, IDEE members went in the field. In other words, IDEE activists were present in the most difficult, most dangerous places, wherever they were needed most. During the ‘80s, Irena assisted Poland; during the earliest ‘90s, IDEE launched programs in Romania and Bulgaria; during Milosevic’s regime, IDEE members took risks in order to assist the anti-nationalist opposition in Belgrade. The beginning on the new millennium has found them also in Georgia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and so on.

I did not meet Irena Lasota in the grayish city of Bucharest in that early period, when secret services (Ion Iliescu’s this time) were again watching closely those who fought for democracy. Rather, I met her in an apartment in Paris, where Mihnea Berindei introduced me to an inquisitive, obviously intelligent, friendly and slightly ironic Polish woman.

What was the connection between the two people, or three, counting myself? As a vice-president and most active member of the League for the Protection of Human Rights in Romania (based in Paris), Mihnea Berindei had dealt with my case during Ceausescu’s regime. He had published the protests I had written during the last years of dictatorship; he had sent journalists to Bucharest; he had taken care of everything that was concerned with the protection of Romanian dissidents. We met immediately after the revolution, in Bucharest, where Berindei had come to help set things on the right track. He was the one who, practically, created the Group for Social Dialogue, the most important civic group in Romania in the months after the revolution.

Mihnea Berindei had come to know Irena Lasota because they both were working with French journalists who supported the Polish opposition. Friendships cemented with liberty in mind are strong, long lasting, and noble. Here I found myself in Paris meeting Irena and Mihnea, two names which should find their place in any history book telling the story of how one of the worst forms of totalitarianism was defeated.

I am relating all of this because I have noticed another thing about IDEE members which makes the organization special: people are involved in its programs based on their traits of character. Inter-human relations count more with IDEE than is usual with most organizations. Trust is essential. Not that the method is totally foolproof – witness the recent case of Foundation IDEE. But in general, the flair of IDEE in developing the network of the Centers for Pluralism – meaning that of Irena Lasota and Eric Chenoweth – is working. They considered that people are the source and they were right. A person’s personality and character plays a major role in difficult, perilous, and changing conditions. And this really is the working environment of IDEE.

When she arrived in Bucharest, Irena Lasota contacted me and a few other people introduced to her by Mihnea Berindei. She lent – through IDEE – a helping hand to the *22 weekly* newspaper, then the most important voice of the Romanian democratic intellectuals. Not only did she finance projects, but she also helped design a few projects that were less elitist in conception and that proved very successful – such as newspaper subscriptions for students and pensioners. She was involved in the broader area of independent media, whose importance for the democratic movement she correctly seized. She provided funding for the Helsinki Committee. She contacted the leaders of Liga Pro Europa in Tirgu Mures – Smaranda Enache and Elek Szokoly – an organization with a key role in the dialogue between the Romanian and Hungarian communities. The first computer and copier of Liga Pro Europa came from IDEE. *Gazeta de Mures*, the daily newspaper that defied nationalist hardliners in a critical period of the city, the site of violent ethnic confrontations in March 1990, was also initiated with IDEE assistance.

Irena and her colleagues witnessed in 1993 the creation of the Foundation for Pluralism (FFP) in Bucharest and invested in the organizational capabilities and good intentions of its director, Luminita Petrescu. They funded all the initial projects of the FFP, Romania’s Center for Pluralism. The Romanian branch of the network is just another proof of Irena’s formidable human flair: Luminita Petrescu became Romanian President Emil Constantinescu’s adviser for NGOs, a position in which she never betrayed the values she had promoted before gaining her position. After 2000, she was able to go back, unashamedly, to the NGO sector, to which over four years time as state secretary she had been so loyal to.

IDEE opened the pages of the *Uncaptive Minds* quarterly to Romanian problems. It was almost surprising that the editor-in-chief of the periodical, Eric Chenoweth, recognized so well the most sensitive issues for this country. It was on this international arena that a first conceptual confrontation took place between the leader of the Hungarian community in Romania, Marko Bela (“The Minority Question in Romania” in Vol. 7, no. 3, Winter 1994) and the author of these lines (“The Minority Question. A Few Observations” in Vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 1995). *Uncaptive Minds* also hosted an English translation of the first debate on the Hungarian issue among Romanian intellectuals (Vol. 6, no.1, 1993).

Years have passed by, Romania has become more democratic and less of a puzzle. And therefore less relevant for the “diehard activists” of IDEE. For us, Romanian activists who had benefited from the support of IDEE, the time had come to make our own contribution to the organization’s more challenging campaigns. So there we were, involved in projects in Serbia, where a number of NGOs fought Milosevic’s criminal regime. We met Civic Initiatives, an organization involved in several of the major events that led to the dictator’s

demise. Miljenko Dereta, the charismatic film director who founded the group, had helped stage the great carnival-like protests in Belgrade in 1996-97 that forced the regime to accept the results of local elections. The Serbian imaginative but often bleak sense of humor had scored a point against Milosevic. NATO bombardments were not enough to defeat the leader who had reinvented the ethnic atrocities of Balkan wars. It took living people on the ground to do the job.

The Helsinki Committee, Liga Pro Europa, and the Foundation for Pluralism each managed to offer assistance to Serbian activists, through the help of IDEE. FfP provided a framework for training new political leaders. From my organization's and Liga Pro Europa's part, our assistance was mainly centered on minority issues. Not only did I share my Romanian experience of the Romanian-Hungarian reconciliation model, a "success story" by comparison, I also managed to establish human relationships that, in turn, ensured long-term cooperation. Thus, I established contact with Sonja Biserko, president of the Serbian Helsinki Committee. It was with her that I discussed the idea of the first Shadow Report on the Serbian minority issue. It proved to be a very useful instrument to prepare Yugoslavia's signing of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

On the same occasion, I also made contacts among the organizations of Romanians and Vlachs in Serbia. The latter, especially, complained – and for good reasons – that the Serbian government was infringing on their rights and was showing a total lack of consideration towards their community. The dialogue was useful for both parts. Liga Pro Europa later initiated common projects with the Romanian communities in the Serbian Banat, the Timoc Valley, and Vojvodina.

The Serbian experience mattered to me from more than an "organizational" point of view – and I am sure it is also the case for my colleagues from the Foundation for Pluralism and Liga Pro Europa. We kept in touch with the hot areas of the battle for democracy, where confronting death teaches one enormously about life. Sometimes, civic activism turns bureaucratic. Other times, it requires long academic pursuits, making one forget basic values, such as freedom and people. It was not easy to stand up again in arms, side by side with Milosevic's opponents in Belgrade, to be traced by the dictator's agents who had killed many undesirable people. All the more impressive then was the courage displayed by IDEE's activists, who traveled across Serbia even in the late '90s, in the midst of the Kosovo conflict, when Americans were considered as enemies.

Another experience linked to IDEE, one which I consider an exceptional moment in the history of democratic solidarity, is Cuba. I found out that there was a connection between IDEE and Cuba only when Luminita Petrescu announced to me that Irena Lasota had been imprisoned by Castro's men and

that we have to gather signatures on a letter of protest. Irena had gone to Havana to assist the Cuban opposition – I learned it was her fifth trip over several years – and she was arrested for several days. She was later released and banned from the country ruled by Fidel Castro. But the event was not without cost for the Cuban regime.

Irena Lasota's initiatives were part of a more substantial help that IDEE and others had decided to offer a growing civic movement in Cuba. The main trend among Cuban Americans, but not the only one, as Castro's regime alleged, was for a tough policy, even for a military intervention, to overthrow the regime in Havana. In other words, the Castro regime should collapse under an external attack, a coup led, of course, by the Cuban diaspora in Florida. Another trend was to support open resistance from within the island and to help extend that resistance throughout Cuba, in the hope of producing the foundation for non-violent change.

IDEE worked with several organizations supporting this second approach, among them the Cuban Commission for Human Rights of Ricardo Bofil and the Directorio Revolucionario Democrático Cubano, both in Miami. IDEE involved the Directorio in the meetings of the Centers for Pluralism, first in Belarus in 1999 and then in 2000 in Tbilisi. At that latter meeting, one of the leaders of the organization, Javier de Cespedes, the great-grandson of a hero of independent Cuba, Carlos de Cespedes, explained to the IDEE network the situation in Cuba and his hope to gain the solidarity of Eastern European organizations on behalf of the Cuban opposition. States where the communist regimes had collapsed were symbolically significant to Cuba. No signal from America could have had the same impact as events in Havana's former allies.

And who could convey a stronger message than Romania? The violent revolution which ended the last communist dictatorship in Europe was in accordance with the most daring dreams of the Cuban heroic tradition. I invited Javier to come to Bucharest the same year. He arrived carrying the posters of five dissidents imprisoned by Castro and we staged a protest in front of the



Smaranda Enache, president of the Liga Pro Europa from Tirgu Mures, Romania, at the Kyiv conference on "The Rise of Nationalism in the former Soviet Union."
Credit: IDEE

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