

10 YEARS OF CENTERS FOR PLURALISM

Words That Come To Mind

by Miljenko Dereta

Miljenko Dereta, an award-winning film director, joined the anti-war opposition in Serbia in the early 1990s. He was president of the Executive Committee of the Civic Alliance from 1992 to 1996 and was a founding member of the Executive Board of the Social Democratic Party led by Zarko Korac. Since 1996, he has been Executive Director of Civic Initiatives, one of Serbia's most prominent NGOs.



Credit: IDEE

ACTION

The first time I met Irena Lasota was in Belgrade in December 1993 when she came as part of a group of independent election monitors. Wars were going on, Serbia was in chaos faced with nationalistic euphoria, an inexperienced and disunited opposition, disastrous inflation, sanctions, Milosevic at the peak of his power. A day before the elections, I took her to a public meeting of the Belgrade Circle, a prominent group of opposition intellectuals. Hundreds of people were gathered in the hall listening to speakers on the stage. Irena asked: "What are they talking about?" "Intellectuals and war," I replied. "What!?! They should be out sticking posters and distributing leaflets." And she left. I followed. Her experience in the successful fight against an oppressive communist regime in Poland was concentrated in one principle, one word, so dear to my moviemaker's ears: Action! This principle is the foundation for all of what Civic Initiatives has been doing in the last seven years. We educate, encourage, and prepare citizens to take action concerning their own destiny.

LISTENING

For me, the Centers for Pluralism is sharing and listening. The impression of informality at CFP meetings is in fact opening a space for personal contacts, for provocative discussions that help us learn about each other's work, and for talking about problems and solutions.

In our work, I view the listening process as a transfer of information from the grassroots to the donor. In this process, the donor-listener is all the time challenged not to use the initiative-killing sentence, "I know what you need and I am going to give it to you." In six years, we never went anywhere to sell "a universal miracle medicine." We talked to local people and organizations and together we helped define their priorities. Our partners participated in all steps of the process. This approach provided maximum results and taught them also to listen better to what was happening around them.

When we started our programs of democratic education, we turned for support to experienced individuals from the region. We found them in the Centers for Pluralism. They had some of the answers we needed. The late Jakub Karpiński was one of the first lecturers in our Democracy Seminar Program. We translated his books and he came personally to seminars in South Serbia to share his experiences from the Polish underground and the first years of post-communist transition. He succeeded to merge political theory and individual involvement into an inspirational call for action. Later we had guests from Romania, Belarus, Hungary, and Slovakia. We listened and learned a lot. But what we felt most was that we shared the same values with people throughout the region and that if need be we could rely on them. It is hard to express in words how much it helped and encouraged us – just to know that you are not alone with your problems and that changes are possible since they happened somewhere else.

Today, with the spreading of the network towards the Caucasus and further eastward, Civic Initiatives is trying to play the same role and to share experience of a victory over a dictatorship and to support those that still have to fight for the first steps towards democracy in their countries.

INNOVATION

"Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges" (BBBB) was the name we chose for the project that changed Serbia and its NGO scene in many ways. The project was created as a result of an assessment of the needs of Serbia under sanctions, a Serbia under the Milosevic dictatorship, a Serbia impoverished by wars,

traumatized by ethnic cleansing, personal tragedies, apathy, and the absence of hope. It was a multi-level project, combining different activities with different target groups with a common denominator: preparing and motivating citizens for action that will result in overthrowing the regime and building a base for democratic change. One must know that the project was developed in an almost empty social and political space avoided by funders and donors. The very few who were present in Serbia were concentrated in and on Belgrade. There was near-total blindness for anything outside of the capital city.

The approach of BBBB developed a completely different strategy based on trusting the capacity of people living in smaller towns throughout Serbia. We knew of their courage, competence, and – most of all – desire to live in a different society. The whole concept was simple: bring people together from different regions, from different ethnic groups, from different types of organizations all of which had absolutely no communication and thus no consciousness of having a common goal and sharing a complementary role in society. Activists from political parties, trade unions, student organizations, media, and NGOs got a chance to meet, learn about each other, talk and quarrel and most importantly to see that without cooperation and mutual support we will never achieve our goal.

We encouraged people to learn, to work together, to value solidarity, to create networks such as the Centers for Pluralism.

FLEXIBILITY

The situation in Serbia imposed a specific approach. The overall goal was clear, but the way to get there had to be redefined almost on a daily basis. The unpredictability of the regime's repression could be defeated only by improvisation and flexibility. Both imply a clear, well defined vision of the end result and serious preparations for "just in case. . ." situations.

Flexibility means not only changing the time schedules. It means reacting to emerging challenges imposed by oppressive regimes. When the law restricting municipal authority was passed as Milosevic's attempted means to take back towns controlled by the opposition, overnight we changed the theme of our democracy program to "Defend the Towns." A series of previously unplanned Town Hall Meetings were organized and citizens got an opportunity to express their readiness to support the opposition.

In Serbia, such flexibility worked perfectly, to a degree that it even influenced an institution such as USAID, which financed our joint program with IDEE. It took risks. It understood the specifics of Serbian situation and worked differently and it resulted in victory of those they supported. I think

they should do it more often, even in so called "normal" situations. Too often I see projects implemented according "to the last word written on paper" – and fail. With just a little flexibility to meet the needs existing in real life, the impact of such projects could be enormously bigger. But this is another story.

TRUST

Being a member of the Centers for Pluralism is now for us an obligation to open the doors of Serbia to the whole region. At the same time, it was an opportunity for IDEE to enter Serbia and find other partners. Eric Chenoweth talked to many people. He chose to work with Civic Initiatives (CI), Yugoslav Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM), and Students' Union of Serbia (SUS), organizations that were at the very beginnings. We met in private flats, worked on kitchen tables, and in cafes. We worked together. Today these three organizations are among the most important institutions of civil society in Serbia, recognized in the region and respected on the Euro-Atlantic level. How proud can one be when hearing young people from Azerbaijan talking about SUS or Belarusians talking about CI?

I have to add that most of the local organizations that received their first grants from the "BBBB" small-grant budget are today centers of local networks, local resource centers, and otherwise leading local organizations. This



The Centers for Pluralism returned to Budapest in October 2000 for the CFP's first regional meeting, hosted by the Democracy After Communism. Above, Civic Initiatives and Otpor representatives demonstrate the effectiveness of NGO election campaigns just after the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic. The poster at right, part of the Izlaz (Exit) 2000 coalition campaign of NGOs coordinated by Civic Initiatives, reads "The Sun Always Rises After Darkness."



Credit: IDEE

was again possible because IDEE used regional experience, combined different strategies, but above all because they were listening, not imposing, and had trust in local capacities.

This respect for local initiatives and trust in local capacities implemented through the “BBBB” small grants program became the basis for founding the Balkan Community Initiative Fund (BCIF) in 1999 during the bombing of Yugoslavia. Today, BCIF is in a process of transformation into the region’s first local endowment. This is called collateral gain.

VISION

A training workshop on NGO management organized by the Centers for Pluralism jointly with the Democracy After Communism Foundation in Budapest at the end of 1993 brought together the representatives of organizations from several countries. It obviously helped each of them to work better and more efficiently, but it was the event that was the turning point for the future development of the NGO sector in Serbia. One of the participants invited by the CfP, at the time representing the Center for Antiwar Action, was Dubravka Velat – known familiarly as Bube. She realized that the kind of knowledge being shared in the workshop would help speed up and sustain development of the NGO sector in Serbia. She shared her vision with Eric and got full support. She fundraised for a training seminar in Belgrade, held under sanctions, and after that for a training of trainers program. That is how Tim TRI was created. In the last 5 years, trainers of Tim TRI trained more than 5,000 people from 1,300 organizations in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Georgia, Macedonia, and Romania. It has done training of trainers programs in Macedonia and Croatia. They trained three additional groups of Tim TRI trainers in Serbia as well trainers for CI’s “Becoming a Citizen” program. I believe that this is the most successful NGO development project in the region. It started with the Centers for Pluralism. It was developed with support of IDEE, OXFAM, and BBBB. But the basis of the success was a vision of several people and support of others that understood and trusted their determination.

COURAGE

Working in Serbia in the period of Milosevic was dangerous for local activists and in a certain sense even more for foreign ones. Irena and Eric visited several times Belgrade, each time exposing themselves to police repression and serious difficulties. The fact that they met face to face not only with Civic Initiatives but also with local partners was not only respected but as well

it was a great support and encouragement for people involved in a difficult struggle. It showed that the media propaganda of the regime, which repeatedly spoke about the West hating Serbia, is a lie, that our democratic forces had friends and support.

FRIENDS

There are 20 countries in which today I have real friends. I met them all in the Centers for Pluralism meetings. They proved in difficult times that the CfP is more than working together, more than sharing the same value system, more than having a common vision of the future. I sincerely believe that one of the most valuable achievements of CfP are these friendships, which are a guarantee that relations between our countries will be maintained for a long time. I will not make a list of my friends. I will just say that when I mention their names to their countrymen, they nod with respect. It makes me proud.

MODESTY

It takes modest people to do what IDEE and Centers for Pluralism have done for ten years. Working in low profile was a pre-condition for success. If the CfP became a well advertised network, it would be much more difficult, even impossible for us to enter many countries and do all the precious work we did. My first analogy was to pioneers, but on reflection I think that foundation builders is more appropriate. Looking at wonderful buildings, no one ever asks “Who built the basement?” Well, we did. All of us in the CfP and IDEE. For 10 years, we were building the foundation of new democracies in Europe. And do not worry. We are still around to see that the building holds.

The Mission Is Not Yet Accomplished

by Vahid Gazi

Vahid Gazi is director of the Inam Center for Pluralism in Azerbaijan and the editor of its publication Third Sector. The following article was written just before the 18th Meeting of the Centers for Pluralism, held in Baku.



Vahid Gazi and Vehid Sehic, director of the Forum of Tuzla Citizens, at the 9th CFP Meeting, held in Baku in April 1997.

Credit: IDEE

Soon, we will celebrate ten years of our Network on the coast of the Caspian Sea. It is an historic event.

The Network's beginning coincides with the beginning of independence of my country. Today, I am the citizen of a state whose national struggle for independence, independence from Russia, raised at the end of the 1980s, was finally achieved in 1992. Today, I also count myself a member of the Centers for Pluralism Network, which provides support for the rehabilitation of societies that were materially and morally ruined by communism.

At this 18th Meeting of the Centers for Pluralism we will meet our friends again. We will speak about problems, news, successes, failures, joint activities, cooperation, conditions under authoritarianism and conditions under democracy. I will get to find out from Miljenko the meaning of Zoran Djindjic's assassination and from Vincuk about the new "reforms" of Lukashenka.¹ I will have to answer Petruška's question: "Will Aliyev once more be elected president this year?!"

For this meeting, we must be prepared very seriously. It is a meeting where we will have to report. We who celebrated our tenth anniversary of state

¹ Vincuk Viaëorka, Chairman of the Belarus Popular Front Party "Adradjenne," was unable to attend the CFP Meeting due to his arrest and ten-day sentencing on March 26 by a Belarusian judge for "organizing an unauthorized gathering.

independence must give a report at the Network's tenth anniversary and stress what we have done during these ten years, what successes we have achieved, what difficulties we have, and why.

At this Meeting, we must also ask two questions: What did the CFP Network achieve during the last ten years? And should it continue its activity?

For me, it is important to keep in mind the last ten years of Azerbaijan's history when responding to these two questions. If I compare the ten years of independence of Azerbaijan and the ten years of the Centers for Pluralism Network, they are not parallel at all. Of course, Azerbaijan is an independent country and Azerbaijan's independence has been strengthened during these years. Hundreds of thousands of people who went into the streets obtained one of their two aims, "freedom," but not their second aim, democracy, and the struggle for democracy is not yet accomplished.

One might ask what has all this to do with the CFP Network? My answer is short. The influence of the Centers for Pluralism on Azerbaijan's democratization process is directly related.

In 1995, when the Center for Pluralism Inam was founded, only a few persons in the whole country knew the essence of the words civil society, non-governmental organization, the third sector, or pluralism. At this time, the CFP Inam began its work among public activists and initiative groups, organizing schools for young political leaders, monitoring of elections, seminars, educational publications, and training. For Inam, the Center for Pluralism Network held incomparable opportunity for the spread of democratic ideas in our country. Under the framework of the Network, there were implemented numerous programs. Hundreds of politicians and public activists, young and old, from Baku and from the provinces, men and women, recognized scholars and local activists all made visits to democratic countries for the first time and gained invaluable experience. Hundreds of democrats came to Azerbaijan to lecture, provide training, exchange experiences, or observe the elections. Today, the establishment of dozens of active NGOs and the expansion of their activity is a result of the programs implemented by Inam through the Network. The Center for Pluralism Inam together with its numerous partner organizations is actively participating in the process of forming civil society in our country.

I remember in March 1997 when we publicized in the country's media that the 9th Meeting of the Centers for Pluralism Network would take place in Baku. The news reported that 50 known democrats from Eastern Europe and elsewhere would be attending, including Luminita Petrescu, adviser on NGO issues to the Romanian president, Emil Constantinescu. Five days after the publication of this news, I received a call from the presidential apparatus from someone introducing himself as the chief of the department on NGO issues. He

expressed his wish to meet with Ms. Petrescu. To my question, "Do we have such a department?" he responded, "Yes, it was founded two days ago." This was at a time when members of the parliament were calling NGOs anti-state organizations.

The Centers for Pluralism Network made real and unparalleled achievements and created great opportunities for the development of cooperative links between political parties and public organizations of Azerbaijan and other countries. The Musavat Party of Azerbaijan and its allies from the Democratic Congress established cooperation with the Rukh Movement of Ukraine, the Belarus Popular Front, the Republican Party of Georgia, and other pro-democratic parties.

It was odd that through the Centers for Pluralism Network, Azeri organizations, activists, and scholars renewed their long lost contacts first with the Crimean Tatars and then with democrats in Central Asia. At the beginning of the 20th Century, these were very natural contacts. Crimea and Azerbaijan were linked by the same current of liberal reformation and in the first years after the Bolshevik revolution, both had emerged with an alternative to communism in the form of liberal democracy. After seventy years, we started again to visit the Crimean Tatars and they visited us. We developed common programs and, together with our Romanian, Mongolian, Georgian, and other colleagues from the CfP Network, we started to do joint programs in Central Asia.

Wherein lies the strength of the Network? Its first strength is the people gathered within it. These are people with experience who know very well what they want and what they are fighting for. They are constantly learning and ready to pass on to others their experience. Members of the CfP Network and those working with them believe that joint activity and cooperation in building a democratic society in postcommunist countries can succeed. The CfP Network is a wide coalition of persons wishing to build a society with equal rights for all citizens, the supremacy of the rule of law, guaranteed freedoms, reliable leaders elected by the citizenry, social welfare, and lack of obstacles for development.

To enter the ranks of this coalition is very easy. The basic requirement is sincerity. If you are sincere, you will obtain what you are looking for and you will be provided every support. At CfP meetings, you can talk for hours and days with persons who struggled against communism, persons who were kept under arrest in prison camps, who participated in democracy's construction, who achieved democratic reforms, or who were preparing for holding democratic power. It could be said that all of these persons have contributed with their activities to the area of human rights protection. They could be called patriots, fanatics of democracy, and human rights extremists.

This is the eighth year of my and Inam's participation in the CfP Network. I have gained numerous new friends during this time. I also saw persons who voluntarily strayed from the Network for the simple reason that they could not follow its simplest requirement. People having no principles and convictions can not stay within the Network for very long because such persons can not find any favorable conditions here.

Should the network continue its activities? Has its activity already been completed?

I will try to respond to this question from the vantage point of Azerbaijan. As I noted at the outset, the Azeri people achieved its wish for an independent state. But I share the view that real national independence does not exist without individual freedom.

Today, Azerbaijan is on the list of countries needing help in the areas of democracy, human rights, and freedom. In most countries active in the Network, free elections have not yet been conducted, legitimate authority has not been formed yet, economic-social reforms have not been undertaken, and people's rights and freedoms are still being violated. In some countries, there prevails a half-democracy; in others, there is full dictatorship. In all these countries, there are democratic groups struggling with authoritarian regimes; the CfP Network or other networks are of great importance in coordination of their activities.

The Centers for Pluralism program is one of the most successful programs implemented by a U.S. institution in the former Soviet Union. Its characteristics are unique. The Network has developed a means to influence the social and political life of countries. The activities of the Network establish the basis for mutual cooperation not only of civic organizations and public associations, but also of political parties and unions. Members of the CfP Network treat its work seriously. It is enough to look at how they participate in election observation to see the difference between the CfP Network's principle of work and that of other international organizations. During the 2000 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, thirty-five members of the CfP Network reported over 500 cases of election falsification and fraud; these facts later were included into the unfortunately few reports of international organizations.

One of my colleagues closely acquainted with the Center for Pluralism program has called it a small variant of the famous Marshall Plan. I share this idea and say to those who may think it is no longer necessary: "Our mission is a democratic independent society: We are independent but the struggle for democracy is ongoing. Our mission is not yet completed!"

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