

Executive Summary

“I did not imagine 25 years ago that we would still be talking about lawless societies, rampant corruption, KGB-based governments, oligarchic power, aggression and dismemberment of countries, torture and killings of civilians, and the muzzling of free media. Seen from the vantage point of 1989–91, this all should have been unimaginable. And yet, the free countries of Europe and the US are not able to face the reality that the world has changed again.”

This statement by **Tunne Kelam**, one of the central leaders of the Estonian independence movement and a longstanding member of the European Parliament, represents the profound disenchantment of the seminar participants at the current state of affairs in the region—a region whose revolutionary promise in 1989–91 portended a golden era of democratic expansion and an end to the conflict between West and East.

The era of 1989–91 is so distant and Russia’s actions today are so emphatic that most people do not remember that era’s broader promise, not just in East-Central Europe and the Baltic States but also in the rest of the independent states that emerged from the former Soviet Union. Several of the participants recounted the rise and early success of human rights and independence movements in several of these countries: Belarus, Estonia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Caucasus, and Kazakhstan in Central Asia. These popular movements, like those in East Central Europe and other former Soviet republics, emerged out of dissident, anti-communist, and independence and national minority opposition groups that aspired to achieve self-determination, Western liberal freedoms, and universally recognized human rights through non-violent means. Before the restoration of dictatorship in much of the former Soviet Union, there were real possibilities that these citizen-driven political movements could establish democracies in all of the countries regaining or gaining anew their independence.

Except for Estonia and the other Baltic States, which restored their independence from the inter-war era, those possibilities receded for the other countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union in the unstable political conditions that followed the 1989–91 revolutions. Some participants placed much of the responsibility for their countries’ failed opportunities to achieve greater freedom and democratic governance on their own citizens, who were unprepared to meet the challenges of overcoming decades of Soviet-imposed communism and often did not act with sufficient decisiveness in getting rid of the old system. Yet, it was commonly agreed that the Russian Federation, which retained much of the military and security apparatus that ruled the Soviet Union along with an historical and Soviet imperial mindset, was the early and defining force in reversing many of those initial democratic gains. The Russian Federation

did this both by instigating or manipulating territorial and ethnic conflicts and by supporting or orchestrating the return of ex-communist leaders to power throughout the post-Soviet space.

The seminar participants identified another key factor in these many democratic defeats. In the immediate period after 1989–91, the Western countries had a limited vision of the possibility for expanding the zone of freedom and truly ending Europe’s division. The West overinvested in Soviet and Russian leadership (at first Mikhail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin). It ignored Russia’s democratic forces and it underinvested in the region’s popular movements for independence and freedom. Indeed, many Western leaders actively opposed the independence movements. Once independence was achieved and the Soviet Union was dissolved, the West failed to back democratic movements and governments, gave a blank check to the Yeltsin government despite its increasingly anti-democratic character, and turned a blind eye to Russia’s role in helping restore and then maintain authoritarianism throughout the region.

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While there was substantial funding for “democracy promotion” programs throughout the former Soviet Union, these were generally ineffective or at odds with official Western government policies. Many of the programs were simply uncoordinated or misdirected according to priorities established by Western governments—not the democratic movements in respective countries—and thus failed to support genuine democratic progress. Sometimes “democracy promotion” programs even became complicit in sanctioning undemocratic elections or bolstering anti-democratic governments, for example through training programs of police and the judiciary. When official Western government policy did support the development of independent states, as in Ukraine, Georgia, or Azerbaijan, it tended to do so by supporting authoritarian leaders, not democrats.

Overall, the West ceded most of the former Soviet space to Russia as a geostrategic sphere of interest. A new dividing line emerged over the next decade between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, now including the previously independent Baltic States, and the rest of the countries that were originally conquered by the Bolshevik Red Army in 1918–20 and forced into the Soviet Union. Expanding the European Union and NATO and moving Europe’s division line westward achieved real progress. Yet, as one participant noted, the situation is hardly “ideal” when “there is still repression for saying the truth” among half the countries represented at the seminar.

Moreover, the narrative of uninterrupted democratic progress in Central and Eastern Europe is itself exaggerated and, in some cases, progress is being reversed, with dangerous implications for Western and regional security.

Economically, few countries recovered from the 2008–09 financial crisis. Dating from even before the crisis, much of the region has not been able to overcome the entrenched unemployment and endemic poverty that resulted from communism, its economic collapse, and the haphazard privatization and reform process that followed. Politically, the wave of successes

in the early and mid-1990s by reconstituted communist parties narrowed the scope and extent of change in many countries and gave the former communist nomenklatura, which dominated these parties, a basis for establishing a lasting negative influence within the new supposed free market economies. In Bulgaria and Romania, democratic forces had delayed and limited opportunities to bring about more fundamental changes in their countries before non-democratic forces regained political power. The demise of Hungary's Socialist Party-Liberal alliance gave way to another phenomenon: the emergence of an illiberal political party whose leader today identifies Russia, China, and Singapore, as models for a new statist economic-political system.

The seminar's participants made note also of the political instability resulting throughout the entire post-communist region from the lack of development of a traditional right-center-left multi-party system and the general weakness of political parties representing distinct political and social interests or political ideologies. Instead, as Soviet and post-Soviet affairs specialist **Charles Fairbanks** summarized the problem, political parties have ended up taking "the state as their base or their constituency" and have become instruments of authoritarian political leaders. Or, if they are not state-controlled, political parties tend to be dominated by single individuals with opportunistic or populist platforms. Seminar participants identified weak political parties as "the most significant problem of countries like Ukraine and Georgia" in consolidating democratic gains, but the phenomenon was prevalent throughout the region. The result is that democratic elections often mask the lack of development of stable democratic institutions.

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There was clear agreement that post-communist countries have failed overall in dealing with their communist pasts and that the communist nomenklatura, most importantly the network of security services, negatively affected the democratic transitions. While there was some disagreement about lustration, or the screening of communist-era officials from elected or appointed political positions, in fact this policy had limited application in most countries and was ineffective in dealing with the overall impact of left-over communist-era institutions (such as government-controlled trade unions) and of the communist nomenklatura. Former communist or security officials gained positions of power or assumed dominant positions not only in governments and parliaments but also in the economy and media where they could significantly affect the politics of respective countries. All of these factors inhibited the development of genuine democratic institutions. Compounding these problems, the KGB systematically removed security files from former Soviet republics as well as former Soviet bloc countries, preventing any full accounting of the past or restitution to victims of gross repression. National remembrance commissions have been the object of political struggles and generally did not have the purpose of—and did not achieve—national reconciliations. Surprisingly, it was reported that educational systems generally ignore the roles of freedom and independence movements in their countries' recent pasts and thus their democratic values are not passed on as an integral part of their heritage.

Participants reported that progress in two key barometers of democratization—the media and civil society—was surprisingly limited and in many countries the situation was dire. Indeed, much of the region’s media is either dominated by authoritarian governments or concentrated in the hands of post-communist party or security networks that use media control to affect political life. **Arif Hajili** and **Sergey Duvanov**, for example, described the progressive repression of independent media in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, respectively, over 20 years. **Tatiana Vaksberg** reported on the “increasing gangsterization” of the media in Bulgaria. “Any Bulgarian journalist,” she said, “can tell you which publications are funded by trafficking in women, or by arms sales, or by Russian organized crime.” In Romania, former security officials connected to anti-democratic parties dominate broadcast media. In the case of Hungary, a new media law adopted by parliament in 2010 has transferred ownership of most media to allies of the ruling Fidesz party, thus limiting public criticism of the government. Even in the more successful Estonia, media has become concentrated in the hands of business moguls favoring post-communist parties.

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Smaranda Enache of Romania and **Miljenko Dereta** of Serbia described how independent civil society in many countries, once emerging and even flourishing, is today threatened by a combination of factors, most importantly increased domestic repression, new legal restrictions, and a lack of domestic resources. But another significant factor weakening civil society was the ineffective and decreasing foreign funding from Western donors for legitimate NGOs. Indeed, Enache and Dereta both reported an increased tendency of Western donors to support corrupt NGOs or those tied to government officials, business interests and post-communist political forces. Such funding practices have contributed to the diminished credibility of civic institutions in the eyes of the public and to reduced participation of citizens in public affairs. Enache’s and Dereta’s accounts of civil society in the region, along with those of other participants, raise a serious question of the overall failure of “democracy promotion” over the last 25 years—not in the idea but in its implementation by Western institutions.

In the seminar’s presentations, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia constituted the clearest examples of the “unfinished business” of 1989–91, cases where progress toward democracy and their incorporation into a liberal Europe was stopped cold. These countries (as well as Armenia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) remain under the firm control of post-communist dictatorships. There were alarming accounts of current political and social life in Russia, where Putin’s rule has turned the country back to the lawlessness, ideological rigidity, and police-state thuggery of the Soviet-era. The most chilling account, however, was by **Mustafa Dzhemilev**, one of the monumental heroes of the Soviet dissident movement and the leader of the Crimean Tatar nation. He presented the situation for Crimean Tatars under the Russian occupation of the Crimean peninsula, the homeland they returned to in the late 1980s and early 1990s after 45 years of forced exile. He reported widespread disappearances and killings, beatings and arrests, deportations and travel bans, destruction of libraries, repression

of elected community institutions, seizures of property and books, police raids and general intimidation by non-uniformed thugs. Threats of mass deportation—evoking Stalin’s forcible deportation of the entire Crimean Tatar nation to Central Asia in 1944—underlie all of the state’s propaganda.

There was general agreement that absent NATO expansion, Russia’s aggressive policy would have already further compromised the freedom and independence of other countries. At the same time, participants were highly critical of the West’s lack of a firm response to Russia’s political regression and military aggression. They expressed great frustration at the weakness of the sanctions imposed on Russia and the inconsistency of Western countries in asserting alliance principles, in defending the post-war international order, and in protecting and extending Western values and democratic standards, including in the new and prospective members of NATO and the EU. As **Tunne Kelam** concluded, “The Western message to Russia up until now is that, despite all the condemnation and protests, aggression pays off. . . . In practice a big European state has been dismembered.”

The most recent conflict in Ukraine remains boiling, but the participants warned that Russia’s aggression threatens to freeze for decades the arc of authoritarianism in the post-Soviet space and to compromise, limit, or reverse the course of democracy’s expansion in Eastern Europe. In addition to the uncertain futures for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the security of bordering NATO countries like Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are now directly threatened—more so by the day. Meanwhile, Western inconsistency combined with Russia’s consistent use of energy as a geostrategic weapon has led to division and vacillation over even a policy of limited sanctions toward Russia among some newer NATO members like Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

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In assessing Western policies, **Charles Fairbanks** identified an additional problem: namely the attraction among Western leaders for governments adopting “liberalism without democracy,” such as Mikhail Saakashvili’s Georgia. He commented that such regimes are “self-contradictory and won’t last” and argued “democracy should be the priority.” Russian independent journalist **Arkady Dubnov** pointed out a related paradox in which European countries have become entangled. In seeking a way out of the need to placate Russia due to their countries’ energy dependence, they have tended to seek allies among energy-rich post-Soviet dictators with the aim of diversifying energy resources and weakening Russia’s dominance over energy supply corridors. In doing so, however, Western countries not only ignore Western values and standards in their foreign policies but also, in order to justify such unprincipled stances, often adopt the misguided notion that dictators, such as in Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, can be distanced from Moscow. In fact, such policies, also seen in countries like Belarus, are counterproductive, since they only reinforce the greater common bond these regimes have with Russia: dictatorship and an anti-democratic and anti-liberal world view.

Such policies weaken the chances for any democratic change extending further eastward. As Belarusian democracy leader **Vincuk Viačorka** remarked, “When the West sends signals that [its] values are relative, it undermines the position of those who are supporting and defending those values in our countries.” In this regard, Western policies fail to recognize the inherent possibilities for expanding democracy in the region and reducing the danger posed by what former president of Lithuania and current European MP **Vytautas Landsbergis** called the “anti-democracies,” countries that view democracy “as a threat that must be destroyed.”

The participants—strategists and veterans of unimaginable revolutions from 25 years ago and of ongoing democratic struggles and transitions—were not unanimous in their assessments, political orientations, or prognoses. However, out of their common experience living under and taking part in the overthrow of communist dictatorships, they shared an abiding commitment to supporting the advancement of Western liberal democracy and universal human rights *throughout* the region and *across* all geographic, political, ethnic, national, and religious division lines that have emerged. New waves of democracy can come unannounced. As **Tunne Kelam** noted, “The past 25 years have demonstrated that nothing is impossible. . . . Why is it still so difficult to imagine that other realities will become true?”

Mustafa Dzhemilev, however, voiced the most urgent appeal of the seminar: “*Do not forget Crimea.*”

Underlying his appeal is the reasonable fear that Western countries will ultimately recognize Russia’s annexation, which some European leaders have already suggested. For the seminar participants, the annexation of Crimea and the larger invasion of Ukraine are the clearest and gravest dangers to democratization throughout the region. The Budapest Memorandum of 1994 ensuring the territorial integrity of post-Soviet states supposedly established a new “post-Cold War arrangement.” The trampling of this agreement by the Russian Federation has brought back the urgent need to defend the foundational principle of the post-war international order to protect nation-states from territorial aggression. Dzhemilev appealed for direct help to monitor human rights violations, to support foreign broadcasts to break through the information blockade in which only chauvinistic Russian TV is aired, to assist Ukraine in rebuilding its military defenses to stave off Russian aggression, and continue to insist on Crimea’s return to Ukrainian sovereignty. On this last point, several participants pointed to the importance and significance of the policy of non-recognition of the annexation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union, which stood in place 50 years and was the basis for these countries regaining independence.

Vytautas Landsbergis expressed also the priority of the Baltic countries to ensure that NATO membership safeguards their territorial integrity. For Russian leaders, NATO membership of the Baltic States “was unacceptable because it made their neighbor safer and for them a neighbor being safer is a bad thing.” He concluded, “Our job is to be safer.”

An even broader need of the whole region was stated by **Ivlian Haindrava**, a leader of the Republican Party from Georgia: “Above all, do not let us alone with this threat.” In this regard, criticism of Western policies toward the region reflected the participants’ belief in the essential importance of the Western alliances of democratic countries—the EU and NATO—in helping to consolidate and further progress toward liberal democracy in the region and in rebuffing the Russian Federation’s efforts to consolidate and further “anti-democracy.”

Toward these ends, the participants urged a re-commitment to the broader promise of 1989–91. These veteran democratic activists and leaders appealed first and foremost for a restoration and strengthening of the *original* goals and previous strategies that were so successful in facing the threat of the Soviet Union and helping the people of the region expand the zone of freedom and advance democracy 25 years ago. Uphold principles of international law. Enforce international agreements such as the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Do not recognize the consequences of imperialism. Defend and advance liberal democratic values and principles. Do not look away out of “geostrategic necessity” (or economic advantage) when those values and principles are being compromised or repressed by governments. Stop dealing with dictators as if they can be “educated” or “turned.” And stop dealing with societies living under dictatorship as being “unready for democracy.”

The participants advocated several strategies and policies aimed at fulfilling the original promise of the 1989–91 revolutions:

- enlarge the zone of freedom around Russia by bringing countries newly in transition, such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, closer to the alliance of free countries;
- adopt policies to expand freedom and democracy beyond their current frozen lines to include Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other entrenched dictatorships;
- develop strategies for encouraging and broadening that part of Russian society that rejects Putin’s repressive and imperialist vision of the Russian Federation’s future;
- act consistently against backward movement away from political liberalism, as in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Serbia;
- support real movement toward democracy, with long-term support for development of genuine democratic institutions and truly independent civil society—not faux post-communist organizations or artificial creations of donor institutions;
- adopt serious policies for helping all countries in the region address the political, economic, and social deficits that prevent further consolidation of democratic gains.

All of this means a fundamental reconsideration of the imposed short-term agendas and failed approaches of Western governments and donors to democratization. At a minimum, “democracy promotion” institutions and Western governments should stop encouraging civic and democratic activists to “work within the system” of dictatorships to achieve piecemeal and meaningless reforms. As important, they should stop imposing their own agendas and bureaucratic requirements in a manner that actually inhibits democracy’s spread.

A recommitment to serious policies for aiding democratic consolidation and expansion means listening to the veterans who helped to overthrow communism. The experience, perspective, and enduring commitment to democratic principles by the participants in IDEE’s seminar are an invaluable resource for addressing the unfinished business of the 1989–91 revolutions. They are the ones who did not find it so difficult to “think of new realities”; it was their values and political imagination that helped bring about one of the most fundamental transformations of the twentieth century. They were right then. They deserve to have their voices listened to now, as well, to craft the strategies needed in the current crisis so that the original promise of that transformation can be achieved and is not lost for the next generations.