

Introduction

From October 3–5, 2014, the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE) brought together 22 veterans of the freedom and independence movements of 1989–91 who have continued until today to play significant roles in their countries' political life for a seminar to assess the state of the post-communist region on the 25th anniversary of the 1989 Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe.

The anniversary of 1989 should have been cause for celebration. In that year, people rose up in country after country of East-Central Europe to support the demands for freedom and democracy of dissident and opposition movements and in doing so brought down entrenched communist dictatorships. The Soviet Union's domination over the region, imposed after World War II, was symbolically ended with the people's tearing down of the Berlin Wall. 1989, however, was just a mid-point in the dramatic rebirth of freedom for the whole Soviet bloc region. Within the captive nations of the USSR, national and human rights movements were already pressing forward with their own demands for an end to Soviet rule. Over the next two years, nation after nation reclaimed its sovereignty and independence and the Russian people themselves rebuffed an attempted coup d'état aimed at restoring the Soviet empire. The USSR was dissolved in December 1991. The Warsaw Pact became null and void.

The revolutions of 1989–91 appeared to bring a swift end to communist rule and the resumption of progress toward national independence and liberal democracy for the entire post-Soviet bloc region. Yet, twenty-five years later, the celebration is distinctly muted. The larger promise and hopes of the 1989–91 transformations remain unfulfilled and the legacy of Soviet communism continues to cast a long shadow. There are significant consequences both for the people of the region and for the West.

Except for the Baltic States, the independent countries that emerged from the Soviet Union saw the replacement of the communist system with authoritarian dictatorship imposed by former Communist Party and KGB officials who were actively assisted from Moscow. Under Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation has reversed further the outcomes of the 1989–91 transformations in its restoration of a police state and its more aggressive pursuit of an imperialist foreign policy. That policy, given impetus in Russia's war against Georgia, was bluntly escalated in the forcible annexation of Crimea and ongoing military operations in eastern Ukraine, actions that threaten the entire post-war and post-Cold War international order. Recent democratic transitions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, while hopeful and signifying true breaks with their communist past and with Russia's authoritarian influence, are neither complete nor stable.

By comparison, most East Central European, Baltic, and Balkan countries achieved larger and longer-lasting changes. But social, economic, and political deficits are notable in all of these post-communist countries. Some governments have gone backward from principles of liberal democracy, while in others former communist elites have perpetuated their influence and even dominance over politics, the media, and the economy. In most countries, there remain serious problems and challenges from the legacy of the communist period. These range from endemic poverty, high unemployment, and social disparities to high levels of corruption, lack of transparency and independent media, weak political party structures, and low levels of citizens' participation in political and social life. Many dividing lines between Western and Eastern Europe remain.

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The Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE) viewed the 25th anniversary of the events of 1989 not as an opportunity just to trumpet again freedom's triumph over tyranny but rather to analyze what occurred in the 1989–91 period, to assess the different outcomes across the post-communist region, and to develop ideas and strategies for taking on the unfinished business of that era.

The 22 veteran activists IDEE gathered for its seminar came from 14 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia and were selected from among democratic leaders IDEE has worked with over the course of 30 years, including from its Centers for Pluralism Network.¹ They included:

Isa Gambar and **Arif Hajili**, the former and current leaders of Musavat, Azerbaijan's main opposition party; Belarusan human rights and democracy leaders **Ales Bialiatski** and **Vincuk Viačorka**; former student activist **Tatiana Vaksberg** from Bulgaria, now an independent journalist; **Petruška Šustrová**, a Charter 77 veteran and also an award-winning journalist from the Czech Republic; **Tunne Kelam**, a leader of Estonia's independence movement, now a member of the European Parliament; two leaders of Georgia's liberal Republican Party, **Levan Berdzenishvili** and **Ivlian Haindrava**; former Hungarian underground publisher and former mayor of Budapest **Gábor Demszky**; independent journalist and human rights activist **Sergey Duvanov** from Kazakhstan; **Vytautas Landsbergis**, the leader of Lithuania's Sajūdis movement and a member of the European Parliament, as well as Lithuanian student and independence activist **Andrius Tučkus**; Solidarity and church activist **Mieczysław Puzewicz**, human rights veteran **Zofia Romaszewska**, and former student activist and current television and film producer **Maciej Strzembosz** from Poland; civil society leaders **Smaranda Enache**

¹ The Centers for Pluralism (CfP) is a regional network established by IDEE in 1992 made up of civic organizations and activists committed to principles of democracy, human rights, and pluralism in former communist countries. For ten years, annual and regional meetings of the CfP were held in different countries that gathered members of the network, which grew to 24 countries, in order to share experiences and best practices and develop strategies for expanding democracy in the region. See www.idee.org/centers.html.

and **Elek Szokoly** of Romania and **Miljenko Dereta** of Serbia;² **Arkady Dubnov** and **Maria Dubnova**, independent journalists from the Russian Federation; and **Mustafa Dzhemilev**, the great hero of the Soviet dissident movement and national leader of the Crimean Tatars, who today, as MP of the Parliament of Ukraine, tries to save his nation from existential threat under Russian occupation.

They were joined by three participants from the United States: IDEE co-directors **Irena Lasota** and **Eric Chenoweth** and **Charles Fairbanks**, a specialist in Soviet and post-Soviet affairs and a member of IDEE's Board of Directors.

Some of the participants are still fighting basic battles for freedom; some confront recalcitrant governments that are undermining hard-won democratic and economic change; and others are continuing their efforts to institutionalize and fulfill the broader democratic promise of their countries' transitions—all now in the midst of ongoing regional instability. They all share the common experience of having spent much of their formative lives under communism and successfully struggling for its overthrow. The biographical profiles of these participants on pages 56–60 are an impressive testimony to the region's long and continuing battles for democracy, human and minority rights, pluralism, and national independence based on liberal principles. They are among the region's “heroes in our midst”—the members of its greatest generation. They are the voices that should be listened to in the current crisis.

The original title of the seminar was “25 Years After 1989: Time for Reflection on Unfinished Business” and it was held on October 3–5, 2014. The program included 6 thematic sessions:

- (1) 1989–91: Revolution, Evolution, or Devolution
- (2) Constitutions, Electoral Choices and Their Consequences
- (3) Post-Communist Development of Political Parties and Oppositions
- (4) Decommunization and Transitional Justice
- (5) Civic Institutions, Civic Participation
- (6) What Happened to the Dream of Independent Media?

There were also two sessions focused on “What is the Unfinished Business?” (The full program is on pages 61–63.) Over the three days, the participants of the seminar presented formal papers and engaged in wide ranging discussion to address key questions affecting the post-communist region, among them:

- Why did freedom and independence movements succeed in some countries and in other countries fail to achieve a basic democratic model of governance?
- In countries where elections became generally free, fair, and normal, why have the transitions from communism been so incomplete and the role of non-democratic parties so strong?
- Why is civic life and citizens' participation in the new democracies so weak?
- What happened to the dream of independent media and other basic democratic institutions?

² The participants mourn the untimely death of Miljenko Dereta at the age of 65 soon after the seminar on November 3, 2014. He was a true hero of Serbian democracy. See “In Memoriam” on page 64.

- What was the role of Russia in preventing a broader expansion of liberal democracy in the region and what role did former communist elites play in re-instituting authoritarian models?
- What role did the West play? In what areas was it positive and in which was it negative?
- What were the missed opportunities and what are the prospects today for advancing democratic freedom?
- In the face of a revanchist Russia, what can be done to strengthen the democratic transitions in East Central Europe, Baltic, and Balkan countries and what should be done to further democratic progress in the rest of the “post-Soviet space” so that they are not permanently relegated to dictatorship and Russian domination?

IDEE hopes—and it was one of the central recommendations of the participants—that this seminar is only the beginning of an ongoing initiative to regenerate serious discussion among major democracy and civic activists in the region aimed at fostering ideas and strategies to spur new momentum to further democratic progress and ultimately fulfill the promise of the 1989–91 revolutions.

The following is the final report of the seminar, which was originally titled “25 Years After 1989: Reflections on Unfinished Revolutions.” It was prepared by IDEE’s co-directors with assistance from the seminar’s rapporteur, Charles Fairbanks. It begins with an **Executive Summary** that offers the most important observations and recommendations of the participants. Following the Executive Summary is a more detailed report of the seminar, with descriptions of the presentations and dialogue among the seminar participants. In a separate publication, a special issue of the journal *Uncaptive Minds*, IDEE provides the full papers and transcript of the discussions. Both the Final Report and the special edition of *Uncaptive Minds* are available on IDEE’s new web site (www.idee-us.org) as well as in print copies upon request. Together, they offer highly engaging analyses, insights, and prescriptions for addressing the continuing challenges and complexities of the post-communist countries.

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