



People pass bust of Latvian communist author and politician Vilis Lacis as they go to vote on Latvian independence, 1991.

Creating the “Open Society Man” (and Woman!)

As a political scientist, Soros Foundation–Latvia board member, vice chairman of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, and former government cabinet member, Nils Muiznieks has seen the ups and downs of transition from almost every angle. In the article below, he assesses how deeply citizens in Latvia and elsewhere have internalized open society values and practices.

NILS MUIZNIEKS

THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE COLLAPSE of communism in the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe is a good occasion for revisiting some of the assumptions that have guided the work of the Open Society Institute during the region’s “transition.” Many of us (that is veteran staff, board members, and/or grantees of the various branches of the Open Society Institute) assumed that within two decades we could help create a new “open society man.” This “new

man”—*homo sorosensus*—would replace *homo sovieticus*, whose remains would slowly decompose on the ash heap of history (located in a dark alley behind the gleaming main streets of the new, “normal” open societies we would build).

This new “open society man” (and woman!) would be committed to democracy and the rule of law, exhibit civic courage when necessary, be respectful (not just tolerant) of minorities, support socially equitable

Voices from Transition

SIMON PANEK Czech Republic

Student leader during the 1989 Velvet Revolution, founder and current director of Czech human rights NGO, People In Need, former board chair of the Open Society Fund–Prague

BEFORE

My parents were always very outspoken. My father spent 11 years in prison during Stalinism. I read books that were prohibited, listened to free radio. Before 1989 I took part regularly in different demonstrations. I studied in the natural sciences faculty at Charles University from 1986. Even the communists didn't care about birds. We weren't scared to talk to each other about political things. Not organize, but at least talk without the fear that someone would take notes and refer you to the secret police.

I remember sitting with friends and seriously discussing leaving the country for three or four years and then returning. We could be imprisoned for a year, but traveling and seeing the world would be worth the price. It would be better than spending all of our lives in a kind of prison like the closed country where we were then.

AFTER

Today the biggest thing is freedom, not only freedom to travel, but speech, freedom of opinion. Slowly, but steadily, governments, ministries, offices, these institutions more and more are starting to be a service for individuals. My NGO, People in Need, is often in opposition to government officials on some policies. But we can have a dialogue with them. We have faith we can say what we want. It's not a risk anymore. The previous regime was based on lies. Everyone was lying to everyone.

What is important is that we can be responsible for our lives. No one, not state or party, is saying we are responsible on behalf of you. It's painful for lots of people in the former communist countries, especially older people. It's difficult and painful to be again fully responsible for our lives. For me it is a joy!

I think we are still in the transition process in a lot of things like education. We must wait for the first post-communist generation. So it will take another 10 or 20 years before we are much closer to having really good stable democracies where the government and politics are serving the people. My father always used to say to me: "Remember, it will take the same amount of time to repair society as it took for the communists to destroy it."



markets, and be a good European while remaining a responsible global citizen. The new open society man and woman would have no experience with rigid ideology and suppression of critical thought. Instead he or she would have acquired some education at Central European University or farther West (preferably the UK or the United States), yet would remain committed to participating in the economic and political life of a reformed Central and Eastern Europe. After a polite interlude of “dual power” with segments of the old guard, the new generation would assume most positions of political, economic, and cultural power in the new democracies of the East.

By the time the new millennium began, or, at the latest, with accession to the European Union and NATO, the old elites would have largely left the scene. Survivors would have changed beyond recognition. Gone would be the old apparatchik, the party hack, the chameleon who shed socialist clothes to become an overnight nationalist. He (seldom she) would have either retired or been marginalized by the new open society elites. The remaining dinosaurs would be socialized into at least publicly professing acceptance of open society values through convincing and relentless arguments from civil society and Europe. The new open society man and woman would gradually displace the old elite and contribute to the stabilization of market and democratic institutions in a new Europe.

So how much of the vision has come to fruition? When I survey the landscape in Latvia and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, I find that only parts of this vision have materialized. The basic infrastructure

(communist youth organization) and the communist-era security services. They benefited from nomenklatura privatization in the 1990s and have proved very adaptable and resourceful in maintaining their influence in the new system through contacts, ruthlessness, and just plain smarts. They have also been able to draw many younger generation elites into their political and economic projects, socializing them into the “old ways.”

While portions of the younger generation do resemble *homo sorosensus*, many of the leading lights in the younger generation remain disengaged from civic life and are far more interested in doing well rather than doing good. Others have emigrated, often after exposure to elite Western institutions of higher education and the lack of well-paying, interesting jobs at home. With the global financial crisis, many more are considering emigration out of disgust for the incompetence of their leaders, disappointment with the general direction of development, and a lack of faith in the short- to medium-term prospects for their country. Several of my former colleagues in the human rights world now live and work abroad. When I ask these smart, young professionals whether they would consider coming back to Latvia, they sigh and ask, “To do what? For what kind of pay?”

The crisis has destroyed or at least weakened some old “oligarchs” and the old parties of power. This, however, does not necessarily mean *homo sorosensus* will ride to the rescue on a white horse. More often, the potential horsemen in Central and Eastern Europe tend to be nationalist populists, decrying the corruption of the old elite and the

“Many of the leading lights in the younger generation remain disengaged from civic life and are far more interested in doing well rather than doing good.”

of market democracy is in place. Multiparty, competitive elections have become the norm, civilians control the military, independent media and NGOs abound, the legitimacy of private property is now understood, and judiciaries, though often weak, are gaining strength and adopting European and international norms. But while all the trappings of democracy are present, the quality is often not what we hoped for, and there are lingering doubts about its durability, especially in the face of the global economic crisis and a Russia that is not only nurturing authoritarianism at home, but striving to export it to neighbors as well.

Homo sorosensus coexists with *homo sovieticus* and what could be called *homo pragmaticus*. In Latvia, some members of the younger generation have assumed important posts: The newly elected mayor of the capital Riga, the first politician of Russian-speaking origin to achieve such prominence, is 33 years old. The prime minister is only 38 and has already served several years as a deputy in the European Parliament. However, despite some new faces, many of the old elites are still pulling strings behind the scenes. The old elites in Latvia and in much of the region derive primarily from the former Komsomol

corrosive impact on society of various minorities and foreign-funded “liberals.” Rather than being seduced by these peddlers of easy answers to complex questions, many members of the younger generation are simply disoriented. They had never known hardship, but now they have lost jobs for which they were paid more than they should have been and can no longer afford the mortgages on their new apartments or the payments for their new cars.

We should not give up on the ideal of creating *homo sorosensus*. There is now a small, but firmly established segment of the population that has grown out of the transition process and influences public debates, monitors the activities of those in power, and works to improve the plight of the socially excluded. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is becoming clear to me, however, that the task of developing an open society will be a longer process than expected. As we think about our future efforts, we should continue to strengthen individuals and groups that already support open society but also make it more relevant to those who remain angry or disillusioned with what transition has brought.