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BACKGROUND

Since achieving independence in August 1991, each of the three Baltic countries has faced the daunting task of carrying out a twofold transformation of society. Each has sought to move from a command to a market oriented economy and former totalitarian to a democratic system of government. Progress in all three countries toward these goals has been slow and difficult. Nonetheless, all three states -- Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania -- have completed the writing of new constitutions and have now held post-independence parliamentary elections. The last Baltic state to do so was Latvia, which conducted parliamentary elections on June 5 and 6, 1993.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

NDI held two AID sponsored civic education programs in 1992. The first, held in June in Riga, Latvia was a civic education conference entitled "The Baltic Transition to Democratic Governance." The conference was attended by a diverse group of parliamentarians, journalists, political party leaders, and government officials from all three Baltic states. The second NDI program was a political assessment conducted by a team of international experts in Estonia in September 1992 on the eve of that country's first post-independence parliamentary and presidential elections.

Over the course of the last six months, from January 1 through June 30, 1993, NDI continued its programs in the areas of civic education and political process development in Latvia and Lithuania. There were two major training programs:

I. Political Party Training Program - Latvia, April 19 to 21

From April 19 to 21, NDI held a political party elections-related seminar in Riga, Latvia. Entitled "Political Parties and the Electoral Process," it was designed to impart to political party organizers and campaign workers practical information that would help them run their campaigns for the parliamentary elections in June more effectively. The program began with a series of consultations with party leaders at their party headquarters in Riga. The next two days were devoted to a series of workshops that discussed political party structure and campaign organization, message development, relations with the media and voter mobilization and outreach.



NDI extended invitations to all non-communist political parties and coalitions, asking each to send 10 participants to the seminar, to include women, young people and party activists from the five electoral regions in country. A total of 72 participants, representing 11 parties and coalitions, attended the program.

NDI's international training team for this seminar consisted of two political consultants from the United States, Peter Fenn and Martin Hamburger; NDI Moscow staff member Greg Minjack; Flemish Liberal Party Member of Parliament Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck from Belgium; Conservative Party activist Bob Lacey from the United Kingdom; Christian Democratic Party worker Sverker Agren from Sweden; and Conservative Party media consultant Hege Hero from Norway. They were joined by Estonian Member of Parliament Tiit Arge (Pro Patria coalition) and Lithuanian Member of Parliament Aloyzas Sakalas (Social Democratic Party).

Annemie Neyts-Utterbroeck gave the keynote speech at the opening plenary session, entitled "Political Parties and the Democratic Transition." Calling herself a "witness to the process of change now underway in the countries of the former communist world, she told her audience that they were the "actors" through whom these regimes would be transformed.

Neyts-Utterbroeck went on to discuss the importance of parties to establish themselves by clarifying options and choices, striving to assemble people who agree broadly on a given program and then actively encouraging individuals to participate in the governance of their city, region or country. Neyts-Utterbroeck concluded by commenting on the large number of parties and coalitions that had fielded slates of candidates in the upcoming elections by noting that "political parties are indispensable, but there shouldn't be too many," and that a political party is not defined by absolute identity of views, but rather an assemblage of people who broadly agree on a program and are willing to work together to help achieve set goals.

Throughout the two days of the program, there were four workshops running concurrently, with simultaneous translation from English to Latvian. Greg Minjack and Sverker Agren co-led the workshop on party organization and campaign strategy, effectively using sample literature for the then-upcoming Russian referendum of April 25. Martin Hamburger led the workshop on message development and was joined for two sessions by Estonian MP Tiit Arge. This workshop focused on the effective use of television spots as a campaign tool, as well the need to be "image-conscious" in the portrayal of candidates. Peter Fenn and Hege Hero were the co-leaders of the workshop on relations with the media. The pair presented a most interesting and useful juxtaposition of points of view and methodology, and exemplified the wisdom of putting together international teams of trainers. Annemie Neyts-Utterbroeck and Bob Lacey co-led the workshop on voter mobilization. Mr. Lacey was particularly effective at conveying the message that parties should exist to express the will of the people and MP's to be servants to their constituency. The pair focused on party-constituent relations, emphasizing the need to know the constituency very well, both geographically and demographically.

II. The Role of the Media in the Democratic Process - Lithuania, June 10 to 12

NDI decided to continue its Baltic civic education programming with a seminar on the media because, despite an impressive expansion of news organizations in the Baltics since independence, there remained significant problem areas. One major concern was the relationship between newly independent radio and television stations and the government-owned broadcast media. Other concerns related to professional ethics and the responsibility of the press to provide adequate access to civic groups and political parties. NDI chose Lithuania as the venue for its program because the currently highly polarized political situation there has exacerbated media problems during the past year.

The members of NDI's international team were Mariusz Ziomecki from Poland, editor-in-chief of an economic weekly called CASH; Lothar Loewe from Germany, a columnist and former correspondent for Berlin television and radio; Elizabeth Pond from the United States, independent journalist and former correspondent for THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR; Shlomo Avineri from Israel, professor of political science at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem; and Aimee Breslow from the United States, Deputy Director of the Libra Institute, a public affairs research center in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The international team was joined by three journalists from the Baltic countries: Anneli Reigas, correspondent for the daily newspaper, RAHVA HAAL in Estonia; Alexei Girgorievs, former member of parliament in Latvia and free lance journalist; and Vidas Rachlevicius, deputy editor of the daily newspaper LIETUVOS RYTAS in Lithuania. Each of the three Baltic journalists provided an assessment of the press situation in their respective countries. All three seemed to speak of one central issue as the greatest difficulty facing the media during the transition period, that of too much state control and influence.

In his keynote address entitled "The Media in Post-Communist Societies," Mariusz Ziomecki said that the idea of a free press is a difficult one for many people, and that, even though the idea had been endorsed in the former Soviet world, it had not yet been fully realized. The current challenge is two-fold: economic and professional, because, he insisted, it is impossible for the press to serve its proper role honorably unless it is totally independent of the state. That cannot be achieved until news organizations learn how to survive economically in a free market. The creation of a free market in Poland, Ziomecki said, was the most powerful factor influencing Polish publications today.

Lothar Loewe opened the discussion by stressing his firm belief in a clear-cut separation between reporting, opinion and commentary. Pond led the discussion on professional ethics. She began, as had Loewe, by insisting on the distinction between reporting, analysis and editorial commentary. Shlomo Avineri led the discussion on the media and the promotion of tolerance in multi-ethnic societies. He began by noting that a small country, such as Israel, which since its creation has suffered conflict between Jews and Arabs, might have something to teach other small countries with ethnic minorities. Breslow made a presentation on the subject of the media and an informed citizenry, drawing upon her experience working through the Libra Institute in

Slovenia to develop an independent media. She concurred with the Baltic journalists that control over the media, particularly the broadcast media, remains in the hands of those who had it during the previous regime, who restricted the amount of freedom of the press to produce substantive reports on controversial subjects, or topics contradictory to the regime's best interests.

The program concluded by dividing the participants into two workshops that addressed ways to resolve the economic problems facing newly independent press and broadcast media. Zomiecki, himself the founder of a new economic weekly in Poland, was especially effective at providing a lot of sound, practical information about how to improve circulation, deal with distribution monopolies, and train staff to be effective salespeople. Loewe discussed the problems facing struggling radio and television stations. He noted that in the Baltic countries the new independents faced the problem of state owned radio and TV trying to compete with them by offering advertising and undercutting them in prices. He expressed the hope that the national parliaments in the Baltic region "would have the wisdom" to abolish state newspapers in order to foster a truly democratic system, since it was in everyone's interest to develop a viable, fully independent press.

EVALUATION

I. Political Party Training Program, Latvia

Latvia's recent parliamentary elections provide several concrete indications of the success of the April seminar. Representatives from five of the eight parties that managed to win seats in the new legislature were present at the seminar. During the course of the seminar, these representatives, as well as those from other parties, met in individual consultations to discuss their specific programmatic and strategic needs with the international training team.

During the seminar, NDI also conducted valuable consultations with representatives of political parties that subsequently failed to meet the requisite voter threshold and win seats in the June elections. In April, these parties expressed great interest in continuing the kind of assistance that the seminar provided. Their failure at the polls underscores the need to develop a program that offers assistance to all democratically oriented parties in Latvia, whether or not they are represented in the new parliament.

Finally, the program succeeded in bringing together activists representing diverse political tendencies and regions, as well as women, young people, veterans and newcomers to the political process. In addition to holding informal meetings and consultations, NDI organizers developed a questionnaire to assess participants' opinion of the seminar. Responses were very positive and noted, in particular, the concreteness of the presentations, the usefulness of supporting materials and the importance of shared practical experience. They also remarked both on the smoothness of the conference organization and the informality of proceedings that facilitated easy exchange among trainers and participants. Many participants asked NDI to return to conduct additional party-building programs in the post-election period.

II. The Role of the Media in a Democracy, Lithuania

The Baltic participants were generally enthusiastic about the program, and responded most eagerly to the keynote address and the sessions on the media and tolerance and the economics of a free press. A number, especially those from Lithuania, singled out the session on the media and professional ethics as being of particular relevance to them today. Many also expressed their appreciation for the chance to meet journalists from other countries. On the negative side, some felt that the international speakers dominated the discussion to an excessive degree, although at the same time they liked the informal atmosphere that prevailed.

A number of participants asked for programs in the future directed at practical needs (management, marketing, advertising, legal issues). Some indicated interest in using case studies around which to organize discussions, and found the use of specific examples offered by a number of the international speakers to be both interesting and instructive.

The main problem with the program, NDI's first in Lithuania, was inadequate attendance. The seminar organizers had anticipated an audience of 50 people, with, at least half coming from Lithuania. In fact, the total number of registrants was about 30, although there were a few uninvited participants as well. The small turnout may have been due to the local personnel responsible for distributing invitations and doing the follow up. The remedy for the future seems clear -- having a permanent NDI staff member in-country several weeks prior to holding a program.