

# ALL-EUROPEAN CONFERENCE OF IOFC IN Kyiv

Wednesday, October 25, 2006

85 people from 17 European countries took part in the 'Saeima' in Kyiv, Ukraine

The all-European gathering near Kyiv, Ukraine was a novelty in more ways than one. People involved in the Initiatives of Change (IofC) network met from 14th to 21st October 2006, at a conference which was given the name 'Saeima' (a Latvian word for a community gathering). Never before had such a gathering taken place outside the international IofC conference centre in Caux. Never before had a meeting had the sole aim of looking at the work of Initiatives of Change across the whole of the European continent. And never before had such a conference of IofC taken place in an eastern European country.

Refreshing was the spirit of honesty and openness to look at the past, both good and bad, of the work of IofC on our continent, which gave space for young and old from East and West to acquire a new sense of ownership of this work. The way the meetings were conducted was innovative, with a maximum of interaction. Through adapting the technique of 'Open Space', every query and conviction found room to be voiced. Consequently everybody felt included in the action planning that followed. In their final evaluations participants described this event as 'historic', 'a turning point', 'the start of a new cooperation in Europe'.

This adventure started in the summer of 2004, when two young women met on the terrace of the Initiatives of Change conference centre in Caux, Switzerland: Maria Wolf from Germany and Laurence le Moing from France. Maria is a professional translator and interpreter who since 1998 has organised on a voluntary basis for hundreds of interpreters to come to Caux to offer their services during the summer conferences. Laurence has worked since 2002 with Initiatives of Change in France, with responsibility, among other things, for the peace education programme of IofC there. The two women discovered that they shared a conviction that there was a real need for more cooperation between the European IofC teams. Perhaps it would help if these teams came together, they thought, in a quiet place with leisurely time, and no pressure, in order to get to know each other better. And maybe a new cooperation could start from there.

Gradually a team was formed and the idea grew into a meticulous plan for an all-European gathering. There were preparation meetings in London, Paris, Kyiv and Hannover. During the meeting in Paris, Kostyantyn Ploskyy, from Ukraine, offered to host the Saeima in Kyiv. Kostyantyn is the founder (in 1999) and director of the Centre for Political Education in Kyiv. So Laurence, Maria and Kostyantyn became central in the process leading to the Saeima. The three were joined by undersigned and other people from different European countries who carried the process with them.

All through the process the Saeima team met with both enthusiasm and scepticism for the idea. Enthusiasm because this plan was seen by some as the next step in a long process, which started after the Second World War, when former enemies met each other in Caux, and started to work together for a united (western) Europe. People like Charles Danguy and Michel Koechlin from France kept the European flame burning within the work of IofC. And in

recent years there had been a new enthusiasm for European cooperation which showed in winter and summer conferences in Caux that focussed on Europe. For such people, the Saeima was the natural next step in this process.

But the Saeima team also met with scepticism or indifference. It was sometimes hard work to convince people that this was an important event that deserved time and energy, and justified the cost invested in it. During the more than two years of preparations Laurence le Moing managed, as the conscientious and responsible coordinator, to keep enthusiastically at it.

In the end, 85 people came from 17 European countries, among them those who had been enthusiastic from the beginning and several who came with a more sceptical attitude. Some countries attended with bigger groups (Ukraine, Netherlands, France, Great Britain), some with only a few (Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Norway, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland). By the end, all understood that this meeting had been vitally important for all those working with IofC in Europe (whether present in Kyiv or not) and in fact had been long overdue.

The flow of the Saeima went from an honest look at the present and past, and then on to make plans for the future. It started with presentations from each country of the work of IofC, in which both the strengths and weaknesses, past and present, were honestly shared. This took a whole day to listen to each other. From the presentations the participants got a picture of the enormous diversity of the work of IofC in Europe. In no two countries is the movement organised in the same way. In some western European countries it is long established and has a solid legal and social base. In other countries, particularly in eastern Europe, there are young new teams which do not have yet an official organisational structure.

But in spite of the diversity and national autonomy of the work of IofC, there is also a history that is shared. Another whole day was spent looking honestly at the strengths and weaknesses of the work of IofC in Europe in general. While being grateful for the riches of the past, there are also things that can be learned from what did not go well. What should be done differently? How can we avoid making the same mistakes?

Looking honestly at the work of IofC in Europe raised many questions and emotions. All these were expressed and worked out in the 'Open Space'. Many had expressed their doubts about this new technique, but it worked amazingly well. Bhav Patel from England came especially to help on this. After having worked for 7 years with IofC, he now works as 'change agent' and facilitates change in people and organisations. He uses 'Open Space' for that. It is a very simple method, which works well, especially in situations where many questions have been raised – as in the first days of the Saeima. Everyone can voice an issue he/she feels passionately about and people can join this person to discuss this. This way more than twenty subjects were discussed in smaller groups during two days. A report was made from each discussion which served as a basis for 'Action Plans' formulated in the final days.

These plans can be roughly grouped in two. There are plans to improve the cooperation between national teams, so that we can learn from each other and tackle certain issues that are shared. Other plans had to do with the ideas and message of Initiatives of Change and how to interpret and express them for our time, so that IofC is and remains an organisation where many can feel at home: conservatives as well as liberals, believers as well as agnostics.

In conclusion one can say about the Saeima – using two different metaphors – that gaps were bridged and that streams came together to flow further in one river. Gaps were bridged between East and West, between old and young. Because people from the West were ready to share their past, good and bad, people from the East were empowered to take ownership of the work of IofC. And since the older participants were ready to be open and vulnerable, the younger ones felt space to make this work their own too.

This made it possible for several streams to come together in one river. The stream of the western European work joined with the fast flowing stream of Foundations for Freedom, which has in recent years created strong teams in eastern European countries, of mostly young people, who are determined to make a difference in their societies. The Saeima was reinforced by nine young people who have in the past year worked with Action for Life, a leadership training programme of IofC in Asia. The nine showed their leadership qualities, taking active responsibility in the conference. Together with other youth present, plans were made for a similar programme in Europe.

The broad river in which the streams come together is like the Dnepr, the river on which the proud city of Kyiv is situated. One afternoon our Ukrainian hosts showed us its golden domed churches and helped us to get a little flavour of the riches of their culture and history. The glittering golden domes on the churches in Kyiv were for us a crowning symbol of this all-European gathering.

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2008-07-11