

March 2011

Ten transition lessons from the work of the Open Society Foundations

Our experience of transition in Europe and the former Soviet Union is rooted in establishing local foundations run by local people, accountable to local boards of governance. For nearly three decades the Open Society Foundations have worked to promote vibrant and tolerant democracies. George Soros first became a philanthropist in 1979 by giving scholarships to black students in apartheid South Africa, soon after he began funding local civil society in communist Eastern Europe. Today, we support justice, media, health, education, human rights and good governance in more than 70 countries.

1. Local ownership is essential

The future stability and sustainability of democracy depends on people feeling that they own the transition, and are responsible for the strengths and weaknesses of their own democracy. If people blame international intervention or foreign governments for what goes wrong, their politicians will avoid taking responsibility.

2. Sequence reforms carefully

If elections are held too early or quick reforms are bungled, transition can get a bad name and leaders lose their credibility. It is worth taking the time to get political institutions right at the start. Therefore transition assistance has to invest in medium and long term, and not just back the first leaders who emerge. Media should be able to operate freely for a sustained period to help ensure the emergence of an informed electorate. Establishment of core elements of the rule of law and citizen security are priorities. Free and fair elections are vital but cannot ensure consolidation of democracy by themselves.

3. Prioritise rule of law and transitional justice

How citizens are treated by the forces of law and order is a litmus test for how accountable the new regime is to them, so it must be the first priority. Transitional justice in various forms - including, where appropriate, legal accountability for past

crimes and comprehensive truth processes - is vital to invest new state structures with public trust and prevent unresolved animosities from prolonging cycles of violence. Ratification of international human rights instruments and the development of a national strategy for implementing them are urgent tasks. It is never too early to nourish a legal culture which makes clear that all are equal before the law.

4. Reform the constitution after a broad debate

New constitutions should be informed by a broad national debate, including on what elements of the previous order enabled the misuse of power. Inclusive discussions help deepen commitment to reforms, and are essential if measures such as the separation of powers, judicial independence and enshrining of human rights within the constitution are to be meaningfully applied. Careful consideration should be given to whether a parliamentary system, a presidential system, or a hybrid, is most appropriate in different circumstances. The success of new public institutions created by a constitution is enhanced where competent, experienced persons of integrity assume leadership roles. Constitutional courts had a significant role in protecting and advancing constitutional rights in Hungary, Estonia, Bulgaria, Poland and Slovenia, for example. In a different part of the world, the Constitutional Court in South Africa has played an immensely important role.

5. Ensure thorough review and reform of the security sector

The sooner that the security sector comes under democratic civilian control, the faster reforms will gain traction. Well trained and de-politicised security forces make the difference between peacefully managed dissent and escalating violence. External support works if it builds on a national programme aimed at establishing democratic control. OSF's experience of police reform in Africa, Latin America and Europe shows the need to diagnose local security needs, evaluate police performance, and involve both affected communities and the police themselves in developing systems of crime prevention and accountability.

6. Support a deep and wide civil society

An active civil society is essential for good governance. OSF has often started by funding NGOs because they are among the first authentic voices of local opinion to emerge in the aftermath of authoritarian rule. They steer public demands and hold public authorities accountable for their actions. NGOs and other civic organisations are also vital sources of energy, expertise and innovation in building effective social and political institutions. OSF entrusts its local foundations, run by local experts, to determine needs and means of support, especially to reach outside capital cities.

7. Build the capacity of independent media to be watchdogs

A free and independent media enables civil society to hold governments to account. Pluralism relies on diverse voices in any society. Countries in transition need support for indigenous media outlets, including digital media that promote democratic values and demonstrate editorial professionalism and independence; develop training for current and future media professionals; monitor and defend journalists' rights; a free and open regulatory environment; and support the development of professional membership-based media associations.

8. Promote transparency

As a common source of widespread frustration with authoritarian regimes, corruption merits immediate attention in the transition. If the public sees an evident fall in corruption, people are more confident about longer-term anti-corruption reform

agendas and national integrity systems, as we have found in South-East Europe. International donors can encourage citizens to fight corruption by supporting reforms of political party financing, education, public health and the judiciary. Transparency may not lead to immediate good governance, but it gives citizens the information to demand improvements.

9. Bring women into democracy

Open societies require the early involvement of women in solving political, economic and social problems. Crises can represent a window of opportunity for the creation of gender-inclusive democracies. Early gender assessment helps to ensure women's participation in governance, from restorative justice to designing the new political set-up and diversifying voices within it. Network-building and international outreach of women are notoriously underfunded and neglected. OSF supports women's political participation as an integral part of democratisation because our experience shows the tendency for some transitions to backlash on women. Often women get an initially prominent role and then are marginalised in post-crisis transition. If women are excluded, democracy fails.

10. Invest in the next generation of leaders

Many of today's Central and East European leaders worked for Open Society entities or had Soros scholarships. We worked with the first generation of emerging politicians to change constitutions and build new institutions, while promoting professional development for young people who would emerge later to run them. OSF has invested in bringing the best national experts into the public service system. In Albania, Georgia, Serbia, Slovakia and now in Moldova, we assisted governments to attract and retain highly skilled professionals from the diaspora or non-governmental sector. A system of incentives is combined with in-house training, internships in European public institutions and scholarships for young civil servants. To reduce brain drain and ensure a higher return of graduates to the country, we negotiate special placements with governments. Beneficiaries commit to working in public service for at least three years, while governments guarantee permanent positions for them in state institutions.