June 10, 1990 – BAFE and Bulgaria's First Free Elections

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I. How It All Began (1985–1989)

I was 23 or 24 when Bulgaria first sensed that something was about to happen – and that it would be for the better. Reagan had started talking to Gorbachev, "perestroika" was under way in Moscow, and the air in Eastern Europe had changed. We did not know exactly what was coming, but the feeling was shared by everyone.

At the time I was a geography student at Sofia University and a very active mountain climber. In 1987 I took part in a Himalayan expedition attempting a new route on Ama Dablam. The team was not only student climbers – it also included professors and associate professors who combined climbing with scientific research. Among them were two former alpinists who were by then professors: Petar Beron and Rumen Vodenicharov. Two years later, in 1989, they became some of the first leaders of the non-communist environmental movements united under the name "Ecoglasnost." Without our realizing it, the mountains had brought us together with the people who would soon stand in the front ranks of the change. Those acquaintances later helped me find my way quickly into the circles of the anti-communist opposition that had already taken shape – the Union of Democratic Forces.

The first real freedom came at the end of 1988 – international passports. For the first time in decades, a Bulgarian could travel abroad without begging his own state for an exit visa. All you needed was an entry visa for certain countries. Today this sounds trivial; then it was a sign that the wall around us was cracking.

The first public breakthrough came before November. In late September and early October 1989, Sofia hosted a large international environmental meeting – the Ecoforum, part of the Helsinki process. Under the cover of ecology, in front of the foreign delegates, the first – let us call them – anti-communist activities were organized in the Kristal garden in the center of Sofia. The demands were formally environmental: a review of two large state projects – the construction of a second nuclear power plant and the diversion of an entire river so that its waters would flow north instead of south. In reality, for the first time in decades people were gathering in the open, collecting signatures and speaking publicly against decisions of the authorities. Behind that meeting stood the same people from Ecoglasnost whom I knew from the mountains.

Then came the autumn of 1989. The Berlin Wall fell, and on November 10 the Bulgarian Communist Party removed its long-time leader Todor Zhivkov. That was the real beginning of the changes in Bulgaria. Around us Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were already moving, and in Romania the regime would fall in blood within weeks.

Bulgarians took to the streets with two demands: free elections and a change to the constitution. For 45 years, Article One of our constitution had stated that the leading role in

the state belonged to the Communist Party and that all institutions were its branches. Unless that article fell, no elections would mean anything.

II. The Students and the Union of Democratic Forces

That winter I was a fifth-year student at Sofia University – a master's degree in geography. Everything was boiling. People were in the streets, and so were the students. In the Faculty of Geology and Geography we founded an independent student anti-communist association – I was its founder in my faculty. Soon we united all the faculties of the university, and then the students from the other universities in the country. That is how the Independent Student Anti-Communist Association was born, which later grew into a federation.

As a student organization we became a coalition partner of the first non-communist formation in Bulgaria – the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). The UDF had been founded in early December 1989, literally in the basement of the Institute of Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences – there, in the cellar of an academic building, gathered the people who would form a broad coalition against the Communist Party. The UDF was a coalition of nearly 30 parties, organizations and NGOs. Some of the parties had been restored after 45 years of prohibition – Social Democrats, Radical Democrats, conservative parties that had existed before World War II. There were new ones too – several green parties, as well as "greens" organized as NGOs. If we look for an analogy, the UDF was Bulgaria's "Solidarność."

My work in those months was simple and exhausting: rallies and tours around the country. We explained to people that the Communist Party was already failing, that the transition was inevitable, and that we had to insist on free and fair elections. The words "free and fair" were not yet a cliché – they were a demand.

III. The Round Table and the Rules of the Game

The changes in Bulgaria were negotiated, not won on barricades. Following the Czechoslovak model, the opposition – the UDF, to which I belonged – and the Communist Party sat down at a round table. There it was decided that the first multi-party elections would be held on June 10, 1990.

One of the last decisions of the round table proved pivotal for my life in the years that followed. It was agreed that independent, non-partisan organizations could observe the elections – registered in court and recognized by the Central Election Commission. Without that provision there would have been neither BAFE nor a parallel vote count.

The elections themselves were for a Grand National Assembly – a parliament empowered to write a new constitution. 400 members: 200 elected by proportional representation from party lists and 200 by a majoritarian, first-past-the-post system in single-member districts. Voting would take place in about 12,000 polling stations across the country. That number defined our ambition.

IV. The Birth of BAFE

Sometime in March 1990 we, the students, met representatives of NDI – the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, an organization close to the American Democratic Party. There I met Larry Garber and Tom Melia. They brought an idea that was entirely new to us: independent civic observation of elections. They told us about NAMFREL in the Philippines and about the experience in Chile – mass grassroots civic organizations that monitor the preparation of elections and, above all, election day itself.

The initial group that met Garber and Melia was small. Besides me it included Miroslav (Miro) Gruychev from the University of Economics and Vladimir Beron – the son of Petar Beron, with whom I had climbed in the Himalayas two years earlier. By then Petar Beron was already secretary of the UDF, so the link between the student group and the leadership of the opposition was personal and direct. We were also greatly helped by Emil Koshlukov – then leader of the National Federation of Independent Student Societies and, in effect, the face of the student movement in Bulgaria. Koshlukov had been a political prisoner: at just 18 he had been jailed for reading a book banned by the Communist Party, and he had been released shortly before, sometime in mid-1989.

Publicly we were non-partisan, and we insisted on it. Privately, however, in that period we worked very closely with the deputy chairman of the UDF, Petko Simeonov, who was also head of the election campaign staff of the great anti-communist coalition. Today this too may sound contradictory. Then it was the only way a student organization could know what was happening in the country and be useful.

From those stories the Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections – BAFE – was born. From the very start we decided two things. First – that we would be independent and non-partisan, even though we all came from the UDF, and that we would follow international standards for domestic observers. Second – that we needed people with names. Most of us were between 20 and 25, with no experience, in a country without internet, without Google and almost without computers. The most coveted political machine of the time was the photocopier – with it you could reproduce your declarations and appeals.

As chairman we invited Kevork Kevorkyan – the most famous Bulgarian journalist, host of "Every Sunday" on what was then the only television channel. Every Sunday his show gathered millions of viewers, and in those months he was openly anti-communist and for the changes. Kevorkyan brought his colleague Dimitri Ivanov as deputy chairman. I became executive secretary – in practice, executive director.

The two journalists also gave BAFE its face. Kevorkyan designed our emblem – a hand over a red heart; it became our poster, pasted up across the country. Dimitri Ivanov came up with the slogan – "All Fair." Short, memorable and entirely in the spirit of what we promised.

With this structure we went to the Sofia City Court. On April 10, 1990, BAFE was registered as the first non-communist non-governmental organization in Bulgaria in 45 years.

Already in April, NDI sent a permanent representative to Sofia – Gerald Mitchell. Gerald played a historic role in the creation of the organization, first of all through his very personality. Tall, red-haired, with a magnificent English accent, he had the look and manners of an English gentleman from the previous century. In Sofia in the spring of 1990 such a man was a phenomenon in himself – and he opened doors that were closed to us students.

We rented our office in the most prestigious building in Sofia – the National Palace of Culture (NDK). We did it rather boldly, almost without money, promising to pay in the future. The location was extremely prestigious and that turned out to matter. People saw a large office in the NDK with the sign of an independent organization and understood that something was really changing. It gave them courage – some to support the anti-communist parties openly, others, who wanted no party affiliation, to join our association directly.

The team in that large office was tiny. It included my climbing coach Anton Hidzhov. There were a few first- and second-year students – Nina Dobreva, Lora Yosifova. There was my friend Miroslav Nankov, an economist, who took on the association's bookkeeping. Very active in the student group was Grozdan Karadzhov, a third-year law student. He became the association's national coordinator and began building our network across the country – relying mainly on the environmental anti-communist movements and the student structures in each town. Over the past ten years Grozdan has served as Bulgaria's Minister of Transport, Minister of Regional Development and Deputy Prime Minister. Working with Grozdan on the regional structures was Vladimir Kirilov, then a chemistry student. We had no cars, so Vladimir would take a train, then a bus, then hitchhike, then another train – and so he criss-crossed the country without pause for the two months from April to the elections. A major role was played by Yuliana Haydutova, a final-year student of information technology who spoke Spanish and English. She was the daughter of Ivan Haydutov, my friend from the climbing expeditions. Yuliana took charge of organizing the preparation and conduct of the parallel vote count – the most complex technical task we had. Today Yuliana is an established attorney in Washington. With these few people we had to organize ten thousand observers.

A small illustration of the enthusiasm and optimism of those months. I hardly went to the university – I had no time for lectures. One day I see the Rector of Sofia University walking through the door of the association. I froze. I thought he had come looking for me to ask why I was absent. He had simply come to ask us to register him as an observer on election day – he wanted to take part personally in the democratization of the country.

The Rector was not an exception. Many of my professors at Sofia University joined the organization – first in building it, then as members and observers across the country. One of them was Hristo Pimpirev, today Bulgaria's best-known polar explorer – the man who founded the Bulgarian Antarctic base and is probably the most recognizable Bulgarian in the southern latitudes.

Kevorkyan brought into BAFE's advisory council authorities from both sides of the political spectrum of the day – people connected to the Communist Party or still its active members, and people who had already left it or were its open critics. Among them were the President

of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the mathematician Blagovest Sendov, and Academician Rumen Tsanev, a prominent biotechnologist. On the other side was Petar Kornazhev – a very well-known Bulgarian lawyer linked to the restored pre-war Bulgarian Social Democratic Party, later Minister of Justice. This group of professors, intellectuals and lawyers was joined by the megastars of Bulgaria at the time – the gymnasts Lili Ignatova and Dilyana Georgieva, world champions in rhythmic gymnastics. Most were over 40 – an age that then seemed very serious to me.

The idea of this council was not ceremonial. We already knew we would run a parallel vote count and publish reports on the elections. Our results and assessments had to be accepted by the whole society, not just the opposition. Names with authority on both sides gave the association a legitimacy that we – twenty-year-old students – could not have on our own.

To be honest: I knew nothing about elections, about observation, even about politics. Neither did the UDF. The few with any political experience had gained it 45 years earlier, in the youth organizations of the pre-war parties. We had no experience, no access to information, no idea how to organize such a thing. That is exactly why NDI was indispensable. Together with them we built from scratch an organization that later became a case study taught in many countries during the 1990s.

NDI gave us information, know-how and knowledge of how to build a grassroots civic organization. But it also gave us something no less important – legitimacy and protection. In the spring of 1990 all the structures of the Communist Party, State Security, the police and the other repressive bodies stood intact and unchanged. Working with Americans, with people from the West, was something like a guarantee that no one would persecute you – a shield behind which a group of students could do things for which, a year earlier, they would have been arrested. Today this may not seem important – or may even sound reproachable. But then it was vital that our activities not bring persecution from the communist organs down on us. It must not be forgotten that the services continued to function exactly as before. The Soviet advisers in the Bulgarian ministries were expelled probably only after the elections – sometime in the autumn of 1990.

The story of BAFE and NDI cannot be told without Brian Atwood, then president of the institute, and Ken Wollack, his deputy. When they came to Sofia they moved with such an aura that one was left with the feeling that Reagan himself had all but stepped off the plane. For a country that until months earlier had seen the West only on television, their presence was a message in itself.

Throughout 1990 we were also greatly helped by the diplomats of the political section of the American Embassy in Sofia – John Menzies, Marshall Harris, Doug Smith and Roderick Moore. They were the people on the ground with whom we could talk every day, and who understood what was happening in Bulgaria not from reports but from the street.

V. The Rival: GISDI and the Germans from Infas

The Communist Party reacted quickly. As soon as the round table opened the door to observers, it created its own organization – the Civic Initiative for Free and Democratic

Elections, GISDI. Its leadership was made up of people connected to the party. So from day one we found ourselves in a race.

The competition ran from early April to June 10 – almost three months. GISDI had behind it the party apparatus, the local structures and the parliamentary administration. We had Kevorkyan, the students and our enthusiasm. We had to make ourselves known, recruit members and build chapters not only in Sofia but in every large district of the country, in order to cover almost all polling stations.

GISDI did one more thing. Together with Bulgarian Television it invited the German polling agency Infas to organize a parallel vote count for them. We were skeptical and had no trust whatsoever in that work. As will become clear later, the Infas story also had a courtroom epilogue.

VI. 9,995 Volunteers in Two and a Half Months

Between the registration at the Sofia City Court on April 10, 1990 and the first democratic multi-party elections on June 10 there were exactly two months. In two months we had to build a national organization from nothing. Today, looking back, it is obvious that we were very naive and very amateur. Probably that is exactly why we succeeded – no one with experience would have taken it on.

The target was 12,000 polling stations – all of them in the country. We had to find, vet, train and credential thousands of people in a matter of weeks, in a country without mobile phones or internet.

I started where I had a network. I was a climber with expedition experience and knew the alpine clubs across the country – the first wave of volunteers came from there. The second network was the student organizations at the universities. Then we tried everything else: notices in local newspapers saying we were looking for independent observers, personal contacts, referrals.

The network across the country rested on local people who found their own way. In Varna the leader of BAFE was Krasen Kralev – he later made a brilliant political career: five or six years as a member of parliament and six years as Minister of Sport. In Pleven our structure was built by Proycho Karaivanov – an ordinary electrician, but with such organizational talent that he managed to recruit almost all the professors and associate professors in his hometown as members of our regional organization. In Plovdiv, the country's second-largest city, our standout was Yordan Pamukov – later he and I were colleagues in the 39th National Assembly.

We advertised openly, but we tried to vet everyone who wanted to join. We feared infiltration – the old secret police and the party had people everywhere. With no experience at all in this, with a team aged between 20 and 25, I think we largely succeeded.

In two and a half months we registered 9,995 volunteers – each with a special credential for election day. We covered 90% of the polling stations in the country.

Our presence in the provinces had two goals. The first – for people to see that in the election administration there was someone other than the Communist Party and its activists. The second – to spread the word that these were multi-party elections, not a ballot with a single candidate as for 45 years. We explained things that everyone knows today: one person – one vote, the secrecy of the ballot, the right to choose freely. Only the very oldest, who had voted before the war, had any idea how real elections worked.

Our slogan was "Do not be afraid, vote." Fear was our real opponent – not GISDI.

And one detail about the scale of the era. None of us had a car. BAFE had three cars, bought with American money, and with those three cars we toured the whole country to recruit ten thousand people.

Since we are speaking of money – let me say how much there was. The funds BAFE received from NDI were approximately 100,000 dollars. With them we bought equipment only: the photocopiers, the fax machines, the three cars and paper for the copiers. Separately, Kevorkyan managed to raise in Bulgaria another 10–15,000 dollars at the exchange rate of the time. With that we paid for electricity, fuel for the three cars, telephones and the other office expenses. None of us received a salary. Ninety-nine percent of everything we did was purely voluntary.

VII. Election Night: The Parallel Vote Count

The most important thing NDI brought to Bulgaria was not money but a method – a parallel vote tabulation based on a statistical sample. For this purpose NDI brought in a particularly colorful personality – Glenn Cowan. Together with Yuliana Haydutova and with the help of Bulgarian statisticians, he drew the sample: every tenth polling station from the list of the Central Election Commission – 10% of the stations in the country, about 1,200. The volunteers for those stations were trained separately.

We also did something we would today call a communication strategy. Together with NDI we began spreading the word in Sofia's political circles that we had a very secret and very effective program, brought by the Americans, with which we had been trained to track and catch any electoral fraud. The truth was far more prosaic – statistics, fax machines and volunteers with copies of protocols. But the rumor did its job: anyone thinking of falsifying already knew that someone was watching.

For the elections themselves NDI and IRI – the International Republican Institute – organized a large international delegation of observers, nearly 100 people. On BAFE's advice they were deployed around the country to the regions where we believed the need for foreign eyes would be greatest. Our volunteers knew where the tension was; the foreigners carried the immunity we lacked.

The communication chain was from another era. With NDI's funding we bought about 30 fax machines and 30 photocopiers and sent them around the country. When the count ended, our observer took a copy of the protocol of his polling station, went to the regional center, and from there it was faxed to Sofia. In the office a few people entered the data into a computer. Today everyone does this with a phone; then it was a revolution.

Around 9:00–9:30 p.m. on June 10 we had the first results. They were disappointing: the Communist Party was leading by 5 to 10 percent. Silence fell over the office. We tried to explain to the leaders of the opposition that they were not going to win. No one believed us.

Around midnight Bulgarian Television invited us onto its election broadcast – hosted by our chairman Kevorkyan. We announced what we had. Today I can admit it: I simply ran away. I could not find the strength to appear in the studio myself and announce the results, so unhappy for the opposition, and I sent Yuliana Haydutova. She did it almost coolly. Our figures were not a forecast but the sum of copies of official protocols, brought by volunteers from all over the country. The result of Infas, working for GISDI, turned out to be almost the same.

People wept. They could not believe that after 45 years the Communist Party again had a majority. Today we joke that Sofia probably wept more that night than it did over the Treaty of Neuilly, so unjust to Bulgaria. But it was precisely our count, backed by the authority NDI already had in Bulgaria, that helped the leaders of the opposition accept the result instead of contesting it in the streets. That applied to the leader of the UDF himself, Zhelyu Zhelev, the future president. Our figures made him believe that the result really was what it was, and find the strength to go out before the crowd of many thousands gathered in front of the NDK – where our office also was – and explain it to them. Years later that choice would be questioned, but at the time it prevented a far worse scenario.

Our assessment that night was brief: the elections were free but not fair. Free – because people voted without coercion and their votes were counted. Not fair – because we presented much evidence of violations, above all in the campaign: use of state resources, participation of the army, the secret police, the police and the local administration on the side of one party. That formula – "free but not fair" – remained the diagnosis of Bulgaria's first multi-party elections.

VIII. After the Elections: From Observation to Civic Education

The elections passed, and the organization of ten thousand people remained. The question was what to do with it. We decided to learn – ourselves and others.

In this period Lisa McLean of NDI appeared. Over the following several years she played the decisive role in turning BAFE from an enthusiastic civic movement into a fully functioning non-governmental organization – with statutes, procedures, a budget and programs, on the model of the American Common Cause and similar organizations for civic participation. Lisa was the person who wrote, instead of me, all the narrative reports and all the funding applications that had to be written. The enthusiasm was ours; the discipline was largely hers. She was more Bulgarian than the Bulgarians – the most Bulgarian of the Americans.

The parallel count had taught us how powerful statistics are. As early as the autumn of 1990, after I had been to a training in America and seen how opinion surveys were conducted there by mail, I came back with the idea of doing the same in Bulgaria. I invited Ivaylo Parchev – a young, slightly eccentric assistant professor of sociology and statistics – to join BAFE. Together with him we began conducting mail surveys and developed our own methodology for parallel counts on two scales: a quick count on a sample of 200 polling

stations, giving a result on election night itself, and a full parallel count on 1,200 stations, like the one we had done in June. So the observer organization also began turning into a research organization. The experience of BAFE and of Ivaylo Parchev was later used together with NDI in various countries – from Africa to Romania, Albania and many others.

The first thing was the "Sunday School for Parliamentarians" – again with NDI. We brought experienced legislators not only from America but from other parts of the world to explain to the newly elected Bulgarian members of parliament what a parliamentarian actually does: how an agenda is built, what a code of ethics is, what it means to work with your constituents between elections. We then did the same for the newly elected municipal councilors and mayors across the country.

By the end of 1990 we had expanded our mission beyond elections – to civic education and civil rights. It was Lisa who did the most to help the organization transform from one dealing only with election observation – of the campaign and of election day – into one for civic education and the defense of rights. The change entered the name as well: after 1991 the association was called the Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights. We began publishing the UN compendium on human rights and the UN Declaration against Torture. In 1992 we translated into Bulgarian, for the first time, the European Convention on Human Rights – a document that a decade later would become part of our law.

As early as the summer of 1991 we developed a very practical line of work – a legal clinic. Our members, lawyers, gave free legal services on two major themes. The first was people who had been persecuted, or felt persecuted, by the old communist regime and could for the first time seek protection. The second was preparation for the coming restitution – the return of nationalized property, a theme that would mark the Bulgarian transition for the whole of the following decade. Among the active young lawyers in the clinic was Ekaterina Mihaylova – later a UDF member of parliament, and after 1997 Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly and chair of the UDF parliamentary group.

Probably in 1992, again with NDI and with funding, as far as I recall, from the National Endowment for Democracy and the British Westminster Foundation for Democracy, we set up a program of information centers in six towns – Plovdiv, Varna, Pleven, Razgrad, Yambol and one more. The idea was simple: in each of them to have a place where anyone could walk in and find textbooks, American and Western newspapers and magazines – things that until yesterday had been unavailable outside Sofia, and often inside it. In a country where information had been a monopoly for decades, a reading room with foreign newspapers was a political act. Later these centers also became partners of the Peace Corps – the American volunteer program abroad, which was just entering Bulgaria. In many places, Varna for example, our centers also served as Peace Corps offices.

Another line was the electoral system. We organized and moderated expert discussions on how Bulgaria should choose a system that would help the parties stay together through the transition. The real goal was to preserve the UDF – that motley coalition from greens to conservatives, from restored pre-war parties to new movements and NGOs.

At the end of 1991 or in 1992, at one of the international meetings in Sofia, Larry Garber brought the idea of the integral ballot. The voter votes for the coalition, but within the list

can mark a preference – the radical picks the radical party, yet the vote counts for the coalition as a whole. I was 27 and the idea seemed brilliant to us. We failed to convince either the politicians or the parliament.

Ten years later, by then a member of parliament, with a group of colleagues I introduced and pushed through exactly this principle. Bulgaria still votes with an integral ballot today. It is perhaps the most lasting mark BAFE left on the state.

IX. Three Stories That Do Not Go into Reports

The parliament's seal. The observers' credentials had to be stamped with the seal of the National Assembly. The parliament was still under communist control and its administration worked for GISDI – they stamped their roughly 10,000 credentials for days on end. I waited. The day before the elections they finished at 6:00 p.m. and left. The woman who kept the safe with the seal let me stay in the room and went out. I started stamping – stamp after stamp. Around 10:00 p.m. I decided I would get nowhere this way, and put the seal in my pocket. That night in the office we stamped all our credentials. In the morning, before the working day began, I returned it to the same box. No one ever found out.

Reagan. Together with NDI and IRI – the International Republican Institute – we hatched a small conspiracy: a letter inviting President Reagan to visit Bulgaria before the elections. We decided to keep it secret but to prepare. I sent a letter to the mayor of Sofia asking that the central squares be reserved on June 8 or 9 for non-governmental rallies for fair elections. The mayor kept calling to ask what exactly we were going to organize. I did not know – and refused to say anything at all. A week before the elections I learned that instead of Reagan a videotape was coming with his address to the Bulgarians. Together with Gerald Mitchell I went to the airport to meet the IRI representative arriving from Germany – as far as I recall, Mary McIntosh. We took the tape and brought it to Kevorkyan. He was very brave – he broadcast it that same evening, around June 3, to the surprise of the whole country. Reagan told the Bulgarians that they could participate freely, that the ballot was secret and that the choice was theirs.

The court case. Months after the elections there was a court case: who had invited and paid the German agency Infas? The prime minister of the day explained to the prosecutors that he had invited them because the secret services had reported to him that the Americans had brought BAFE "special software" to manipulate the national elections. So he had called in the Germans – to keep us in check. The software was a videotape of a Reagan speech. It was funny on both sides – for them and for us.

X. What Remained

From the experience of the Philippines and Chile, from the knowledge of NDI and from the improvisation of a few dozen students in Sofia, a model emerged: how in two or three months, without money, without equipment and without experience, to build a civic organization able to observe an entire electoral process – the campaign with all its elements, election day and the days after – and to count the votes independently of the state.

Recognition came quickly. As early as 1991 BAFE was included with a positive assessment in the U.S. State Department's annual human rights report – the document in which American diplomacy describes the state of freedoms in every country in the world. For a one-year-old organization founded by students, that was more than praise – it was international legitimation.

The experience gained in 1990 we began sharing, together with NDI, the very next year. In January 1991, with Krasen Kralev, then leader of BAFE in Varna, I left for Albania – we flew via Budapest, and in Tirana we were met by the Hungarian ambassador to Albania. Everything was organized by Tibor Vidos, a friend of NDI. That January I met Sali Berisha, and shortly before, at the beginning of the month in Sofia, I had met Aleksandër Meksi and Dylber Vrioni – the future leaders of the Albanian anti-communist opposition and members of the first pluralist parliament. Berisha became President of Albania, Meksi – Prime Minister.

At the same time I met Ljubčo Georgievski, Dosta Dimovska and Boris Trajkovski from Macedonia. At our suggestion they created MAFE – the Macedonian Association for Fair Elections, a mirror image of BAFE down to the name. It was headed by Boris Trajkovski, who later became President of Macedonia and, sadly, died tragically.

That model traveled. In the 1990s it was used in almost all neighboring countries – Macedonia, Albania, later Serbia and Romania – and then much farther afield: Russia in the late 1990s, Pakistan, Benin, Yemen, Nicaragua. More than 17 countries worked with know-how born, in part, in Bulgaria.

For me the most important thing about that spring is not the number 9,995, nor the percentages on election night. The most important thing is that on June 10, 1990, in 90% of the polling stations in the country, there stood a person who had not been sent by the party – and that millions of Bulgarians heard for the first time the simple sentence: "Do not be afraid, vote."

NOTE

This narrative is not a transcript of the recording. It is a narrative which the storyteller has written to provide additional details not included in his verbal recording.