

## REFLECTIONS

My first exposure to the development of community foundations in Central and Eastern Europe was in 1994 when I was part of a study tour to Bulgaria. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation assembled a group of us from the United States and the United Kingdom. Doug Jansson from the Milwaukee Foundation, and Steve Meyer, a consultant to community foundations who had been involved in evaluation of Mott's Neighborhood Small Grants program, and I were in the US delegation, as was Mott program officer, Suzanne Feurt/. The United Kingdom was represented by Gaynor Humphries and another colleague from the recently organized Community Foundation Network.

Unfortunately, I do not remember the name of the Bulgarian organization that was interested in community foundation development. The idea was that some place-based clubs would morph into these foundations and our task was to explain the community foundation concept and to share with Mott our feelings about the likelihood of success offered by the clubs. Suffice to say that we were somewhat skeptical but impressed by the enthusiasm of everyone we met.

The community foundations in Bulgaria went through several iterations between 1994 and 2014, and I was fortunate enough to see them in several phases of their development. I also visited the foundations in Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Bosnia, Croatia, Ukraine, Russia many times and observed their evolution.

What I saw was the realization that change could come about based on citizen involvement. That there was common understanding that there was economic potential in the countries in central and eastern Europe and that potential could be put to good use through development of the non-profit sector. Even though there have been many bumps in road, not the least of which is the current resurgence of totalitarian notions of government, the potential still exists.

During a 2004 visit to Poland, I observed the director of the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy was very discourage. I reacted with the following inclusion in my trip report to the Mott Foundation, "Pawel was in a very dark mood and expressed a good deal of anxiety about the future in Poland of the community foundations, the Academy and the nonprofit sector itself. Recent policies adopted at the country level to implement the flow of European Union (EU) funds for scholarships had completely eliminated the nonprofit sector from eligibility to receive/distribute these funds, even though the next-to-last draft of the policy had permitted them to do so. Pawel used this example to speculate about the possibility that the gains of the independent sector would be obliterated and whether there was any future for this *American* concept – the community foundation.

I jumped on this statement as it suddenly put into perspective something I had been thinking about for a while, but never put into words.

My discourse went something like this:

It is time to forget Cleveland in 1914. The fact that the community foundation idea originated there has far more to do with the fact that a banker wanted to save time and money when handling trusts than with any peculiarly American set of values or “deToquevillian” instinct. It could just as easily have happened in Warsaw.

It is time for the community foundations in Europe to develop their own identity and talk about the evolution of the movement in the European context. There are some genuine and valid similarities in the way these institutions in Europe<sup>2</sup> (and I included everything from the UK to Russia) have been developed and have grown. Instead of brooding about having adopted something from abroad, think about the ways you can develop an identity for these organizations throughout Europe. It is time to “Europeanize” the community foundation concept.”

Although fourteen years have passed since I made this statement., it seems to me that this is what you are doing. I wish you well.

Dorothy Reynolds  
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