



Voter Education Synergy – IFES Moldova, By Steven Gray

Synergy is a buzzword if there ever was one. In general, it refers to achieving a greater result by working with others versus working alone. In IFES projects around the World, we try to achieve synergy in building democratic institutions such as election commissions, civil society organizations, and local public authorities. For those of us in the field, we can feel synergy when a particular initiative is successful, when organizations we work with grow and prosper, and when elections we work on, are problem free.

IFES is always working on elections with other organizations. At a minimum, we usually work with a local election commission. At a maximum, we work with other local or international organizations also supporting an election commission or civil society organizations. It is often an alphabet soup of organizations with OSCE, IOM, UNDP, AEC, IDEA, COE, NDI, IRI, and others working with us. IFES is usually pretty good at working with others, but we've all encountered battles over turf and clashes on who will do what and when. This is especially true when different donors are supporting different organizations with similar, if not the same, programmatic objectives.

In Moldova, there are four international organizations are working directly with the Republic of Moldova Central Election Commission (CEC). They are:

- The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
- The Council of Europe (COE) and its sister organization the Venice Commission
- The International Organization of Migration (IOM)
- IFES Moldova

We've had some good collaboration and cooperation over the past two years. And, we have mostly focused on different aspects of election assistance. Still, as we headed into preparations for the November 2010 early parliamentary elections, we knew that all four of us had money for voter education.

For the two national elections in 2009 and a 2010 referendum, each organization did separate voter education TV spots. All spots were approved by the CEC, but each international organization contracted with different media companies. This resulted in voter education messages with different looks and different feelings.

In September 2010, when it became apparent that early elections would take place, IFES convened a meeting of the CEC and its four partners to plan a coordinated voter education campaign. We all had modest sums of money available for TV, radio, and print advertisements and voter education materials. There was a sense that if we pooled our resources, we could achieve something greater than if each organization did something on their own. In other words, synergy would happen and a greater result would be achieved.

The September meeting produced a commitment from the five organizations to work together and produce one integrated voter education campaign. Five main messages were distilled: “check the list”, “get out and vote”, “voting procedure”, “identification documents needed”, and “those abroad should vote too.” Each of those messages would be funded by different donors, but they would be part of one campaign.

We knew this fourth national election in less than two years would have to battle potential voter fatigue. In addition, with domestic turnout already high, we knew that increasing voter turnout abroad (estimated at somewhere between 15% and 35% of the voters’ list) would be essential to have any hope of breaking the political stalemate that had led to so many elections in such a short period of time.

One of the key innovations was an agreement to focus messages for out-of-country voters on their relatives in Moldova. In previous elections, IOM in particular, had run ads on TV in Italy, the largest market for Moldovans living abroad. However, since voter turnout had been relatively low (only 18-19,000 voters), we decided to focus on those living in Moldova and enlist them in the effort to increase the number of voters abroad.

The commitment to one voter education campaign funded by several sources led to the decision to buy one campaign strategy. Since time was of the essence, both IFES and UNDP put out identical requests for proposals (RFPs) to advertising agencies. We decided that whichever organization could get a contract through their bureaucracy the fastest would be the organization to pay for the strategy. In an ideal World, the CEC would be the organization doing the contracting. Unfortunately, neither the CEC, nor the donors, were ready for that.

As in most elections, preparations for the voter education campaign were fast and furious. IFES -DC did yeoman work in getting the contract for the voter education strategy through the process and signed. The overall strategy, and the design and production of ten voter education spots, was completed within a two-week period. It was a massive effort testing the capacity of all of the partners and the advertising agency chosen to lead the project. The challenge of coordinating the five partners and the ad agency in doing so many different things within such a short period of time was a task that was totally underestimated. It was a bit like “trying to herd a bunch of cats.”

Still, despite what we now realize were inevitable challenges, the overall campaign produced a synergy that resulted in an enormously successful election. Voter turnout exceeded all expectations with over 1.7 million voters casting a ballot. Out-of-country voting was amazing as 65,000 people, 3.5 times more people than ever before, went to one of the 75 polling stations set up in 29 countries. Public and private TV stations showed the ads over 2,000 times during the four-week campaign, all for free. A website dedicated to the campaign “theme” song was visited over 150,000 times during the four weeks with the hip-hop version of the theme song’s ringtone was downloaded 1,500 times.

Our relatively small contribution of about \$100,000 along with the \$300,000 from the other donors helped leverage a voter education campaign that was well worth over \$1 million. The “buzz” the campaign produced made the investment worth more as the media covered the “innovative” CEC

campaign with dozens of news articles and hours of TV coverage on news programs and talk shows. It made us all realize that synergy is a wonderful thing and well worth trying to achieve.

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