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The Extraordinary Legacy of John Edwin Mroz

By Vladimir Ivanov

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Today, New York will see a remarkable gathering of diplomats, politicians, entrepreneurs, academics and civil society activists, coming together for a postmortem celebration of an American who became a center of gravity for the foreign policy elite from all continents in an effort to make the world a better and safer place.

John Edwin Mroz, the founder and CEO of a leading global foreign policy NGO, the EastWest Institute, passed away two months ago at the age of 66, after losing a battle against a fatal combination of blood cancer and macrophage activation syndrome.

I was lucky to work under the leadership of this extraordinary man for the last 13 years of his life, and now, while feeling the aching hollow of his absence, I am desperately trying to fathom John's legacy and how his lessons and experience could be used to drag Russia's relations with the West out of the current dire situation.

Together with American millionaire Ira D. Wallach, John started the EastWest Institute

(initially called the Institute for East-West Security Studies) in 1981, with a genuinely global mission to help end the Cold War.

He was building on his previous experience as an independent negotiator in talks between the Reagan administration and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. The concept was to go beyond traditional think tank activities and develop a "think-and-do tank" focusing heavily on behind-the-scenes discreet meetings involving policymakers and influential leaders "who usually do not speak to each other."

In the 1980s and 1990s, Mroz made hundreds of trips to the Soviet Union and its successor states in Central and Eastern Europe. Key discussion topics included arms control issues between the Soviet Union and the U.S., NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries and later economic issues of the post-Soviet space.

Working closely with Mroz in later years, I was impressed by his ability to challenge and find common ground with interlocutors of diverse political and professional profiles, from communists to liberals, and from top military and FSB officials to representatives of artistic bohemia.

Obviously John was immensely driven by his passion for changing the world through connecting people. He not only sacrificed his own time to interminable flights all over the world, but he made it an institutional rule for the EastWest Institute's internationally diverse board of directors to have one annual meeting outside of the U.S., where the organization's headquarters is located.

There was a deep sense that moving to historic, often risky places and having direct dialogue with people on the ground there played an important role in actual history-making.

John's favorite undertaking was ad-hoc, high-level task force meetings involving open-minded political, military and private sector leaders, sometimes followed by policy reports and public debates, sometimes helping establish sincere unofficial communication between critical decision-makers.

On some occasions, such missions played a pivotal role in U.S.-Russian relations, like the ones in 1987 on Gorbachev's reforming policy of perestroika, in 2001 on Putin's Russia, in 2007 on U.S.-Russian strategic dialogue, and in 2009 on the "reset" agenda.

Another great tool of John's think-and-do approach was engagement of regional leaders at the grassroots level to brainstorm local issues in critical regions and come up with sustainable solutions. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EastWest Institute opened offices in Prague, Warsaw, Kosice, Helsinki, Budapest, Belgrade, Kiev, Moscow, Brussels and other locations in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia.

I would dare to characterize those years from 1989 to the early 2000s as one of the best periods in John's and the EastWest Institute's history, its "Silver Age," focused on reshaping regional economies and Euro-Atlantic relations, benefiting from bottom-up creativity, an abundance of private and government funding, and a drive of American, European and Russian elites to find a new post-Cold War cooperative setup.

Witnessing this expansion in Russia while working for the Fiscal Transparency, Transfrontier Cooperation and the Private Sector Initiative programs in 2000-06, I can confess that in these efforts the institute was very delicate in its respect for national sovereignty, placing an emphasis on market reforms and acting with the consent of national governments.

From 2006 to 2009, the institute had to reinvent itself once again to successfully address the new challenges of an emerging multipolar world. We "went global," closing or spinning off most of the institute's traditional locations and grassroots activities in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, shifting regional focus to China, Afghanistan and Southwest Asia, and intensively exploring new global security issues like cyber-threats and food, water and energy challenges.

Fundraising constraints during the economic crisis also played a role. The institute's Moscow office survived these strategic adjustments but reduced its staff numbers and scope of project activities.

Although the institute continued persistent efforts in working with Russia on a number of critical global issues like anti-terrorism, arms control, cyber-security and Afghan drug-trafficking, the Euro-Atlantic dimension went somewhat out of focus in recent years, and the Ukrainian crisis appeared like an unexpected tornado for many of us at the institute.

On April 9, John stopped by my home on his way from the airport to his hotel to discuss details of his upcoming important meetings in Moscow. We had lunch with my wife and engaged in a long discussion of the post-Crimea situation. As usual, John was eager to learn from ordinary locals about political perceptions in Russia, market and social trends, everyday life, and historical perspectives.

We drank tea in my guest room in front of a television set in the corner and a big Russian 19th-century picture showing a quiet river, a green forest and remote darkness of an approaching thunderstorm. "The television reality is a nightmare," John sneered bitterly, and, pointing to the picture on the wall, said: "This is the real world."

He was deeply concerned about increasing propaganda and escalating disruption of dialogue channels between Russia and the West. He was prepared to go against the tide and brainstormed possible solutions to the crisis with genuine openness and a lot of subtlety, clearly understanding how deeply realities are different from the media cliches.

Later that week he demonstrated it in his debates in Moscow, Brussels and Washington. He was excited about the scope of challenges the world was facing, and was thinking of a reinvention of the EastWest Institute's mission.

It turned out to be his final visit to Russia. A couple of weeks later he was hospitalized and concentrating on fighting for his life. During the institute's board meeting held in Moscow in late May, we heard his last message in a video address recorded in the hospital: "Now it is up to you. Keep the dream alive."

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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