



WEBSITE REVIEW

Transitions Online

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Name of Site: Transitions Online

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URL: <http://www.tol.cz>

Type of site: NGO, online newsmagazine

Housed at: Transitions, Prague, Czech Republic

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Transitions Online (TOL) is an online newsmagazine devoted to the coverage of events in the twenty-eight post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. The site debuted in July 1999 as the successor to *Transitions*, a print publication originally sponsored by the Open Media Research Institute. When printing costs forced *Transitions* to cease publication, former staff members founded TOL. Now established in its own right as a Czech NGO, TOL has grown into one of the most important websites for those interested in the current events of the region. According to the organization's annual report for 1999/2000, the goals of TOL are to provide news and analysis from the region in a knowledgeable and accessible way, to sponsor the development of professional journalists, and to pioneer in Internet non-profit publishing. Visitors to this exciting site will find that TOL fulfils its mission admirably.

TOL is best thought of as a newsweekly. Articles from correspondents throughout the entire region survey a wide range of issues, from transportation in Tajikistan to gay pride in Zagreb. The breadth of coverage makes this an especially useful site for students or anyone else interested in the politics, economics, culture, and history of the region. The news articles are brief enough to be read in a single sitting and are addressed to a general audience. The site is easy to navigate and, for the most part, links lead quickly to the desired article. The 'Week in Review' section is the core of the site, with 'Our Take' providing the editors' views on a specific issue of special interest.

Other sections that can be accessed most readily from the center of the site are 'Columns', 'Analysis', the 'Balkan Reconstruction Report', and the 'TOL Wire'. Links situated on the left of the screen include 'In Focus', 'Features', 'Opinions', 'Media', 'Books', 'EU Observer', 'In Their Own Words', 'Columns', and 'Letters to the Editor'. A secondary listing includes the online resources TOL offers, such as the archives; 'Newsstand', a listing of links to local publications for each country; and 'Jobs', listing job opportunities in NGOs. The division into the various sections is clearly meant to aid the visitor, yet the different sections can occasionally be confusing. It is sometimes difficult to understand why an article is included in a certain category. However, this does not necessarily impede the visitor from finding material, as the site is easily searchable from the homepage.

While TOL offers editorials and opinion and analysis pieces, it does not offer lengthy articles that, in any case, its readers would probably prefer to read offline. It is also clearly focused on politics and current events. There are no special sections for arts and culture or even religion. More in-depth coverage of these other areas would be welcome, but it might also jeopardize what TOL does best, which is to provide timely, provocative, independent news and analysis to thousands of readers.



The growth of TOL is readily apparent to anyone who checked the site even briefly a few years ago. The site now includes features such as the Balkan Reconstruction Report, the TOL Wire, and the Central European Review. These sections are clearly a part of TOL, but their format presents them as separate sites, each with its own content. The Balkan Reconstruction Report is the most established of these separate publications, similar in format to TOL but designed to take the reader beyond the stories of the region's ethnic conflict. While TOL's correspondents are young, promising journalists writing specifically for TOL, TOL Wire acts as a daily news wire, providing English-language translations of news from newspapers throughout the region. Central European Review was an independent online effort that has now merged with TOL. One can link to the CER site www.ce-review.org from TOL, but the merger is not yet complete. Material from CER is still being transferred to the archives of TOL. Once fully launched, CER will substantially improve TOL's coverage of arts and culture.

TOL's innovative initiatives to reach more readers justify the group's claim to be a leading pioneer in online publication. TOL reports that its correspondents have gone on to write for CNN and other news organizations and have enrolled in graduate schools of journalism. In addition to its younger correspondents, the site has drawn the talents of established writers, such as Lawrence Weschler and Tim Judah. TOL is also promoting the same kind of independent journalism through its site in Russian, TOL.RU, offering the same content as in TOL. Some TOL efforts are still in the developing stages, such as the 'Knowledge Network', intended to be a compendium of information and sites for each country in the region. In August 2002, I could access the 'Knowledge Network' only through the TOL Store and, even then, many sections were still under construction. In addition, one hopes that online journals focusing on Central Asia will eventually become a part of TOL's family of publications.

TOL is a self-supporting organization. Its primary funding comes from various foundations, especially the Open Society Institute, the Eurasia Foundation, the Robert Bosch Foundation, and the Media Development Loan Fund. From its inception, though, TOL has sought to develop paid membership. Membership fees are \$25 for individuals (\$12 for students). Universities, libraries, NGOs, corporations, and other institutions can subscribe at higher rates. Members of TOL have greater access to special features of the site, such as the 'Country Files', with detailed profiles, links, and articles on each country and greater access to the TOL archives. These are important features, but a majority of the material on TOL is available for free. In addition, TOL offers free two-week trial memberships and will even consider requests for exemption from the membership fee in case of financial need. Recognizing that a membership fee would prohibit many in the region from signing up, TOL offers membership free to citizens of the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. TOL also offers merchandise – back issues of *Transitions*, books and magazines, music, films, T-shirts, mugs, etc. – through the TOL Store. The offerings in the store are still somewhat slim, though this might be a good place to locate the region's relatively little-known literature and music.

Those who teach in relevant fields would do well to recommend TOL to their students. In teaching the history of Eastern Europe, I have used articles on the site to provide a starting point for student projects or initiate class discussion on current events. Articles on pop culture or quirky topics, such as the recent changes to the calendar in Turkmenistan, can serve to pique student interest.

TOL is an excellent example of how the Internet can serve the general public as well as the scholarly community. By offering news from local correspondents, TOL presents

more accurate portrayals of the events in the region. Both the student doing a report on Kosovo and the professor looking for information on the latest developments in Azerbaijan can find what they need easily. The benefit to specialists of such a wealth of English-language information located on one site is obvious, but those with a casual interest in the events of the region will find much here to answer their questions about the region's past conflicts and current events.