

Presentation on Civil Society in CEE Development Context.
Prepared for the DECIM learning event, Vienna, June 16, 2006

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Dear ladies and gentlemen,

„Civil society is much talked about, but rarely understood“ is a very frequent statement made by many around us.

So what is it and what do we mean when we say that we develop civil society? And can civil society be developed? If so, how? I am sure that many of us would not be here if we knew.

First, let me try to make a short excursion on several approaches to civil society in a more theoretical perspective and then to follow with few comments on the regional context and why I think it is important in this region to continue in strengthening civil society.

Civil society is a very old concept and reaches back to Aristotle and Hobbes with presenting it as a society with ideals and virtues. For modern era the term was coined by Hegel as a dialectical relationship between the macro-community (the state) and the micro-community (the family) which the Marx and others explained the civil society as a result of development of economic relationships leading towards the middle class – bourgeoisie.

Today, there are a variety of definitions of civil society, but none of them to be universally used and accepted. For example:

- Civil society means spontaneity
- Civil society is creative anarchy
- Civil society is an expression of freedom

Or more sophisticated working definition by the London School of Economic Center for Civil Society

- Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a

diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power.

For the reason of the elasticity of the concept, In defining civil society I like those approaches that describe the civil society through multiple perspectives.

I am inspired by the approach of Michael Edwards, (Director of Civil Society at Ford Foundation) which he presents in his book Civil Society. There he presents three schools of thought towards the civil society:

- 1) Associational
- 2) Normative (Good society)
- 3) Civil Society as Public Sphere

- 1) **Civil Society as expression of associational life.** This approach emphasizes the Tocquevillian tradition of voluntary associating that is increasing the political socialization of the people who are engaged in public affairs for common good. In this approach associating is good in itself, the higher density of associations, the more volunteering, the more trust and social capital is developed which is good for the society. Despite a rapid growth of associations and NGOs in the CEE countries after 1989, it is still behind in the density of associations and voluntary work in the Western Europe. In this approach, many of us can see a approach prevailing in the civil society development in the CEE after 1989. And indeed, the political aspect of civil society has been important until today and I would certainly subscribe to it. The tradition of repressive state from pre 1989 era is still present, citizens are often in unequal position against the state, the state appetite is very large in a sense of ownership of the public domain. Citizens as individuals need to organize themselves to pursue public interest or defend their rights that are often violated or not pursued by political parties or official institutions. If we look at the Visegrad countries, we can see that the role of the civil society in reinforcing the democracy is not perceived unanimously and by all. Some public leaders such Vaclav Klaus, the President of the Czech Republic openly and consistently questions this role of NGOs and proposes serious objections to this role: lack of accountability, lack of legitimacy, competition with government and market, distorting market forces. The civil society in this Klausian sense is in free time activities, limited service delivery and voluntary organizations. On the other hand there is Vaclav Havel who sees the role of the civil society as an actor entering the public sphere and actively shaping it and reinforcing the democracy. Besides these justifications of civil society there are also economic justifications: efficiency (achieved through voluntary involvement, leveraging other resources, motivation), complementarity (filling gaps of government failure – especially in services or other utilities).

The political concept, became popular with the fall of the communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the “power of the people” became famous and was thought to be a recipe for political change. This, political approach towards the civil society is still very strong and meaningful today in the CEE. It is based on an Anglo-American liberal tradition that understands civic institutions and political activities as basic components of a specific type of a society, in which various actors lead deliberations around issues and identify public interest.

Donors and Intl organizations hoped that the civil society support will be enough for several years until c.s. will root itself. This was a mistake.

Some see following stages in the civil society development in the CEE:

The political development has strengthened the perception of the civil society as a place which provides protection to citizens from the state. However after series of failures in Africa (Rwanda, Sudan) or Europe (Kosovo, Bosnia) more critical voices emerged and cooled a bit the euphoria on what the civil society can and should do and that it is also a strong state that is needed to address issues of the time.

- Enthusiasm – early nineties
- Disillusionment – mid-late nineties
- Adaptation – looking for a new role: Social Partnership Role

The civil society has been also misused in the time of the transition that this region has been going through. As David Rieff points out coincidentally the civil society became a solution to the decreased role of the state which stopped delivering many of its services.

EU accession process – Copenhagen criteria – ultimate incentive for the c.s. development. But has it been enough of it? No.

2) **Civil Society as Normative Concept: Good society.**

Civil society is often, as one the definition shows it, charged with values. And indeed, when we try to look at civil society without the values, we see that this concept becomes somewhat empty. It is the values and ideals that make the spirit of the civil society. But values are often competing and there is a lot of examples where the values contest changed in the Kulturkampf.

Nevertheless, the issues of solidarity, mutuality, social justice or freedom provide the energy and motivation behind many civil society activities.

3) **Civil Society as Public Sphere**

- a. Peaceful problem solving
- b. Work out the diversity and plurality
- c. Civil society as arena for deliberations, association and institutional collaboration

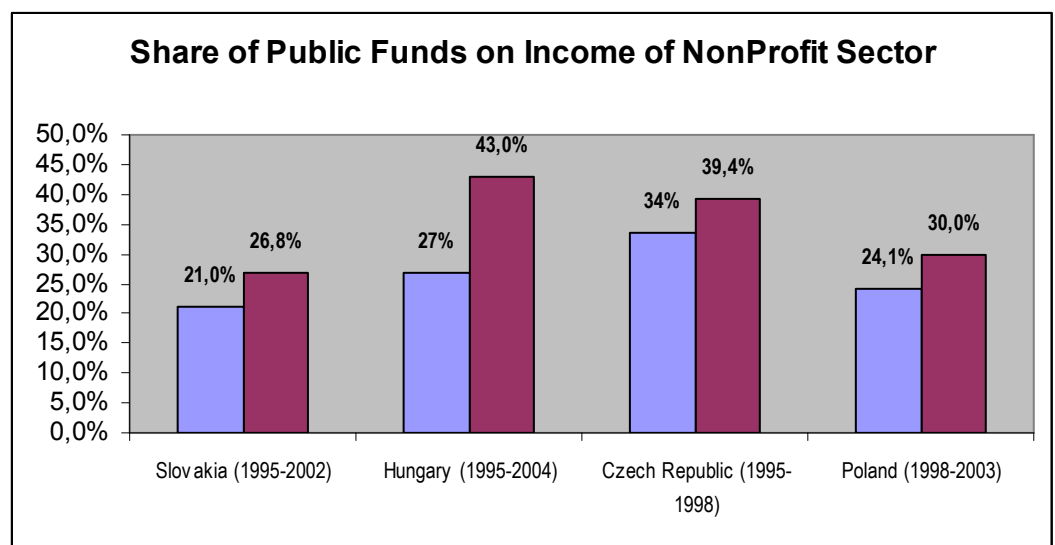
So where are we now in Visegrad and beyond?

1. The very common way of looking at civil society in the V4 is how are organized relationships between the citizens (organized in NGOs) and the government or how is filled the space between the family and the state.
2. We can not get rid of our history: The generation that remembers the nature of the communist state is in power in the region. This generation is still mistrustful and resentful to compulsory organizing s and compulsory volunteering. Also, large segments of populations are disappointed from the transition experience. And finally, the persistence of informal networks leading to cronyism is a fact.
3. Where are we in Visegrad in c.s. and government relationship? Some researchers consider the model of relationship of the state towards citizens (NGOs) in Visegrad as not fully crystallized and still **emerging** (Bullain, Zimmer, Beebe) and containing elements of various models which are identified as corporatist/etatist model and liberal, sometimes combined with the social-democratic model. The corporatist model stresses the partnership and subsidiarity elements and the role of service provision of NGOs. The liberal model is based on a pluralistic, right-based approaches that separate the government from the private civil society organizations that watch over the performance of public institutions. The nineties have been a period when the liberal model has been supported; both by the dissident tradition still present in the civil society but also by the donors, most notably US private foundations but also by the European Union especially in the pre-accession phase.
4. **Service provision role.** In last five years, the service provision role of civil societies in Visegrad countries has increased. This is due to the decentralization process, most notably in Poland and Hungary, but also present in Czech Republic and very recently in Slovakia (for example the regional self-governments in Slovakia have provided over \$20 million in purchasing services from NGOs in 2005, (Kubanová)). Also, the nature of EU structural funds strengthened the service role of NGOs. As some point out (Wolekova, Zimmer) the service provision is taking place now in a competitive environment where NGOs compete with private for-profit sector and other government organizations. The changing nature of the European welfare state or at least questions about its continuation pose questions for civil society organizations in several immediate neighbors of Visegrad countries – Austria and Germany how can they act in a context when they are gradually becoming perceived as an alternative service provider along the state and market organizations and equally important, provide an advocacy voice and watch over public institutions..
5. **Legitimacy** However, the legitimacy of NGOs is still far from optimum. The factors are the remaining mistrust towards organized voluntary sector from the socialist era but also the examples of some scandals related to the emerging

NGOs in the nineties. In the ideological front, the neo-liberal view which is presented strongly by Vaclav Klaus and some other opinion-leaders in the region questions the legitimacy of NGOs in their both roles as they distort the natural competition in the market (political parties in the political sphere and for-profit companies in the economic activities) and prevent the natural allocation of resources.

6. *Improved interactions of the state with organized civil society.* The governments in the Visegrad region have made significant steps ahead in shaping their relationship with NGOs. This can be an expression of the tendency of gradual recognition of the role of civil society in transformation but also in development. These comprise policy documents on cooperation such as the Government Strategy towards the Civil Sector (Hungary, 2002) or establishments and operations of units or advisory bodies in government (Slovakia 1999, ongoing in Czech Republic) or through changes in the legislation (percentage mechanisms introduced in Slovakia in 2001 or in Poland in 2003, public benefit law adopted in Poland in 2003). The arrangements of relationships with organized civil society of local governments is present as well through formal agreements (Gdynia, Szczecin, etc.) but also indirectly through access to information and participatory mechanisms in decision-making. The process of establishing a better framework conditions for civil society organizations will continue in future.

7. *Increased of public spending on income of NGOs.* Visegrad countries follow the EU and in fact global trend of increasing public fund in the total income of NGOs as is documented by Lester Salamon. (see Table 1, based on data from Galazka, 2005; Sebestenyi – Scsaurszki, 2005; Salamon, 2003, Štěpánková-Petrášová, 2004). This may suggest increasing of the nonprofit sectors overall that can be considered as generally positive trend. Some of the Mott grantees expressed concerns (especially in Hungary) whether the too generous public funding would deteriorate the autonomy of the civil society organizations and teach them a new form of dependency.



- *Social exclusion of marginalized groups.* A continuous challenge in future years will be to ensure the marginalized groups of the society will be heard and their rights will be applied. It is likely that some marginalized groups issues will be addressed (Roma) because of EU interest in them, but some will be left neglected.
- *Democratic deficit.* The national level institutions become more experienced and learn modern practices how to communicate with public, however this learning only slowly progresses on regional and local level. In future there will be great needs in ensuring participation on local and regional levels. Some feel that there will be continued deficits of democracy on local level. They are also very concerned with the quality of the democratic process in their countries and raise the issue of quality of democracy very high among issues of the context.
- *Changing nature of the nonprofit sectors.* Some of NGO actors feel that there is already a crisis of leadership in the civic sectors as the old generation of leaders is not able to respond to new challenges. The generation of leaders with the experience of the pre 1989 is getting exhausted and new networks do not emerge fast enough.
- Many NGOs consider as important for their work *the governmentalistic, partocratic and etatistic tendencies* of their governments. They perceive the changing situation as strengthening of the state while citizens are not sufficiently empowered. The citizens' empowerment agenda is in their view not present in the official policies and also it is not sufficiently present in the education system. The so called Anglo-Saxon concept of civil society (or liberal), present in the nineties in this region is in view of almost half of the interviewed. The tendencies towards welfare state are often not differentiated from the traditional etatistic mentality of former administrative elites and bureaucrats that still operate in governments. The growing economies mean in all V4 countries inclination of major political forces to the concept of the welfare state, which resonates with paternalistic expectations of significant layers of the population in the region.