

Civic Sectors in Transformation and Beyond: Preliminaries for a Comparison of Six Central and Eastern European Societies

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Abstract The paper presents a comparative analysis of the recent developments in the civil societies in six Central and East European (CEE) countries: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Focusing on the level of civil society organizations (CSO), it first discusses the changes in their role as social actors and co-operation within the civic sector itself. Second, it examines the process of civic–public sector partnership consolidation, and third, some of the more recent challenges that the civic initiatives in these countries are facing. It aims to highlight the diversity of patterns of civil society development in the region and argues for a reassessment of its ‘weakness’ thesis.

Résumé L'article présente une analyse comparative des développements récents au sein des sociétés civiles dans six pays de l'Europe Centrale et de l'Est (ECE) : la République Tchèque, l'Estonie, la Hongrie, la Lettonie, la Lituanie et la Pologne. S'attachant au niveau des organisations de la société civile (OSC), il analyse en premier lieu les modifications de leur rôle en qualité d'acteurs sociaux et la coopération avec le secteur civil lui-même. En second lieu, il examine le processus de consolidation d'un partenariat entre les secteurs public et privé, et en troisième lieu, certains des défis les plus récents auxquels les initiatives civiques sont confrontées dans ces pays. Il vise à souligner la diversité des tendances du

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développement de la société civile dans la région et postule une réévaluation de la thèse de sa ‘faiblesse’.

Zusammenfassung Der Beitrag präsentiert eine komparative Analyse neuester Entwicklungen in den Bürgergesellschaften in sechs mittel- und osteuropäischen Ländern: Tschechische Republik, Estland, Ungarn, Lettland, Litauen und Polen. Der Beitrag konzentriert sich auf die Ebene der Bürgergesellschaftsorganisationen und diskutiert zunächst die Änderungen in ihrer Rolle als soziale Akteure und ihrer Zusammenarbeit innerhalb des gesellschaftlichen Sektors selbst. Anschließend wird der Prozess der Partnerschaftskonsolidierung zwischen dem bürgerlichen und öffentlichen Sektor untersucht. Und letztlich werden einige der neueren Probleme erörtert, mit denen die Bürgerinitiativen in diesen Ländern konfrontiert werden. Ziel des Beitrags ist es, die unterschiedlichen Muster der Bürgergesellschaftsentwicklung in der Region hervorzuheben und für eine neue Bewertung der „Schwäche“-These einzutreten.

Resumen El presente documento presenta un análisis comparativo de los recientes desarrollos en las sociedades civiles en seis países de Europa Central y del Este (CEE): la República Checa, Estonia, Hungría, Letonia, Lituania y Polonia. Centrándose en el nivel de las organizaciones de la sociedad civil (CSO), primero trata de los cambios en su papel como actores sociales y la cooperación dentro del propio sector cívico. En segundo lugar, examina el proceso de consolidación de la asociación del sector cívico-público, y en tercer lugar, algunos de los desafíos más recientes a los que se están enfrentando las iniciativas cívicas en estos países. Tiene como fin destacar la diversidad de patrones de desarrollo de la sociedad civil en la región y defiende una reevaluación de la tesis sobre su “debilidad”.

Keywords East- and Central European countries · Civil society organizations · Differentiation · Cross-national comparisons · Democracies in transformation

Attempts to understand how East- and Central European civil societies¹ have evolved over the past couple of decades frequently emphasize their shared experiences as well as extend these commonalities to the entire post-socialist region from the former Soviet Republics to the Balkan countries (e.g. Howard 2003; Kopecky and Mudde 2006; Celichowski 2008; Ost 2011). We will, by contrast, seek to show that understanding the past and present dynamics of civil society development requires a more careful consideration of the differences in the patterns and stages of civil society consolidation in the region. We will be basing these

¹ Here and in the following, we use the notion of civil society on the presumption that in the broader sense the society that reproduces democracy includes a set of supportive institutions, values, the articulation of different interests, etc. At the same time, we keep in mind that it contains a more specifically understood civic sector that includes a whole variety of different types of civil society organizations (CSOs). When we speak of only membership organizations, we use the term voluntary associations. Generally, we follow the distinction between the broader and the more specific definitions of civil society as used by Ernest Gellner (1994/1996, pp. 5–12).

considerations on empirical data collected in six countries—Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. These are all countries that have been relatively successful in implementing political and economic reforms as well as became the members of the European Union in the first phase of its enlargement—forming, hence, a distinct group within the post-socialist region. They have also unambiguously oriented themselves towards the ‘Western’ values, embraced democracy and the rule of law as well as emphasized that thereby they are returning to the ‘West’ (e.g. Lagerspetz 1999).

In many respects the development of the civic sector is an example of the spread of a transnational model of practices, the local implementation of which is conducive of ever-increasing homogenization. Indeed, particularly in the initial phase of transformation, analysts and actors alike tended to expect that the newly liberated societies of Central and Eastern Europe simply adopt the ‘Western’ model of civil society as a key component of democracy and then assessed its successes and failures accordingly (e.g. Howard 2003). Yet in Western Europe, it took centuries for civil society to emerge and consolidate itself, and over these long-term developments, it has guaranteed itself a sustainable existence as a power that balances both the political and economic forces. Central and Eastern Europe civil societies, by contrast, lack such a long consolidation period and the socialist regimes interrupted the already fragile continuity (Bernhard 1993). Also, while in Western Europe, this development took place ‘from bottom up’, in the new democracies the ideal (and often idealistic concept) of civil society was implemented largely from above. Civil society development in post-socialist countries has, furthermore, been shaped by such factors—absent from the longer development in Western Europe—as the widely accepted anti-political and anti-state stance (e.g. Bernhard 1993; Cohen and Arato 1995, pp. 69–82).

Therefore we find it more useful to understand civil society development and consolidation in these countries less as an adoption or deviation from the ‘Western’ model than as a process that Alasuutari has aptly characterized as domestication of transnational models (Alasuutari 2011a, b). In this process, models and concepts are never simply adopted and implemented in their pure imported and often normative form, but always synthesized into the pre-existing discourses and practices. Although Alasuutari sought to explain change in stable societies, his analysis, we suggest, also allows for a more adequate consideration of the local determinants of development in the case of societies in rapid transformation.

There are only a handful of comparative studies of civil society including some of these countries, and this is partly because there is very little comparative data available. The retrieval of such data is often complicated not only by very different, if not incongruent, methods of data collection, but also by different legal definitions, reporting practices and public statistics. Consequently, the existing comparative studies as well as the widely accepted ‘weakness’ (Howard 2002, 2003) diagnosis on the region’s civil societies tend to be based on indicators of individual participation. We will, by contrast, focus on the level of civil society organizations (CSO) in order to unravel—by analysing the rather limited comparative data available—a cluster of unduly neglected issues in the comparative literature. First, we will briefly point at some of the key differences in the context in which the civil

society building started in the late 1980s in these countries. Second, we will continue to highlight the considerable differences in how the legal frameworks in each country define and regulate the civic sector, and discuss the implications these divergences have on the role of CSOs as social actors. Third, we examine the process of civic–public sector partnership consolidation and the variety of measures and practices that have evolved in the six countries. We will conclude, however, by pointing at some of the new shared challenges that the CSOs in the region face. Last, but not least, whereas the state of art still tends to be based on research dating from the period before the accession into the EU of these six countries, we will try to broaden its perspectives by including in our analysis the more recent developments.

Civic Sector as an Emerging Social Force: Differences in Background

Already prior to the beginning of the transformation period, experiences of organized civic initiative varied significantly across the six socialist societies. While in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the continuity of organized civic activity, at least in the minimum sense, was preserved even during one-party rule (Miszlivetz and Ertsey 1998, see also Bockman and Eyal 2002), voluntary associations in the Soviet Baltic states were eradicated to a much greater extent. In Hungary, for instance, although the state intervention in the activities of civil associations was legally tightened in the 1970s, it was reduced again in 1983 (Bocz 2009). The law on foundations was adopted in 1987 (Kuti 1993). A similar law in Poland dates back to even earlier, to 1984 (Leś et al. 2000, p. 12). One of the reasons for tolerating civic organizations was that, often, these were involved in providing public services deemed necessary by the socialist regimes (Leś 1994; Kuti 1996; Lagerspetz 2001).

In Hungary, the sheer number of CSOs in the 1980s was impressive too, with 8514 membership associations operating by the end of the decade. Unsurprisingly, however, these associations were overwhelmingly apolitical in their activities—and taken the grip of central control in the socialist states, they could hardly have been otherwise—with over a third being sports clubs (36 %), a quarter being leisure clubs (24 %) and another major group, fire associations (14 %) (Bocz 2009, p. 124). As the authoritarian regime ‘softened’ in the second half of the 1980s, the first associations concerned with the protection of the environment, urban development and relations with the Hungarian diaspora emerged indicating already a significantly more political orientation (Bocz 2009, p. 125). Also, in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the activities of voluntary organizations were given a legal basis relatively early, even if in a still-controlled political context. Although at the time such associations acted under strict limitations, their existence as legal entities can still be viewed as a preliminary stage of the emerging civil society followed by a new phase after the collapse of the regime.

Not less importantly, these semi-autonomous Soviet satellite states had—again in stark contrast with the Baltic states—politically influential dissident movements already before the weakness of the regimes became obvious and organized mass opposition since the early stages of its disintegration (e.g. Bernhard 1993). Here,

Solidarity in Poland and the movement led by Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia are only the best-known examples. On the one hand, it was characteristic of these opposition movements to give civil society an anti-statist and anti-political definition (e.g. Foley and Edwards 1996, p. 42). Thereby, they attributed to their activities a unity that dissolved along with the initial shared adversary—the socialist regime—and presented the aims of the emerging civil society in a pre-political language (Kopecky and Mudde 2006, p. 5, Lagerspetz 2009, pp. 158–161). Soon, it became clear that this pre-political discourse based its aims and appeal, at least as much, on nationalism than on democracy (Ost 2011, pp. 173–177). On the other hand, in the Central European states, ‘nation’ and ‘civil society’ were, nonetheless, widely perceived as separate political phenomena (Verdery 1996, p. 107).

In the Soviet Union, by contrast, even a preliminary public sphere was lacking before the meltdown of censorship in the so-called Perestroika period. Also, the dissident movements failed to reach the wider local public as their emergence in the Soviet Union, following the Helsinki Pact in the early 1980s, resulted not in easing, but in the tightening of censorship and control by the regime (Niitsoo 1992). This meant, first, that in the Baltic countries, the very concept of civil society had yet to establish itself, and, second, that in contrast to Central Europe, nationalism became the main discursive source of its legitimization. Thus, in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the distinction between civil society and the nation had only to begin to take shape (Lagerspetz and Vogt 2004). Third, the establishment of the legal and political space for a newly emerging civil society only started in the late 1980s (Ruutsoo 2004, Lagerspetz 2008, pp. 6–7). Preconditions to the emergence of civil society in the Baltic states included the coining of new forms of knowledge, new laws and institutions, changed attitudes and thoroughly revised procedures. In contrast to the Visegrad countries, today’s laws regulating the activities of CSOs in the Baltic states started to come to force only in the second half of 1990s.

Therefore, we should be careful not to over-generalize when referring, as is has become common since the late 1990s, to the unexpected ‘death’ of civil society in the post-socialist countries (Smolar 1996; Lomax 1997). The causes named in this context range from the lack of cohesion in these societies (Von Zon 1994) and low individual participation in CSOs (Howard 2003) to the departure of active individuals from the civic to the public or business sector (Smolar 1996; Lomax 1997). As we saw, this diagnosis makes less sense in the case of the Baltic countries, where it was only in the 1990s that the civic sector acquired institutional and legal structure and thousands of new organizations were established. While civil societies in Central Europe found themselves in crisis or, at least, in a decline due to a re-constructional phase of the sector, the difficulties in the Baltic states were related to founding a civil society in the first place.

These differences in the starting positions in the six countries in the late 1980s are reflected also in the number of organizations at the time. By 1990, there were almost 10,000 civic initiative organizations in Hungary (Miszlivetz and Ertsey 1998, p. 73; Bocz 2009, p. 125), and by 1994, the number had risen somewhere between 23,000 (Kuti 1996, p. 28) and 31,000 associations (Leś 1994, p. 14). This was also the period when an extensive creation of a new ‘hybrid form’ of organizations, which are founded and funded by state institutions, yet formally and

legally belong to the non-profit sector, started to take place (Csóka 2000, p. 9). Similar figures appear in studies of CSOs in the Czech Republic (Leš 1994; Brhlikova 2004, p. 22) and Poland (Leš et al. 2000, pp. 12–13), although the number of organizations before the change of the regime was lower there (Woods 2000; Pospíšil 2005). Yet, even amongst the Visegrad countries, there were significant differences in the constitution and orientation of the civic sector, some of which we will explore below. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in contrast to Poland and the Czech Republic where CSOs had a strong presence in the domain of social services already since the socialist period and continue to do so today, in Hungary, the sport and leisure organizations continue to dominate the voluntary sector (Koldinska and Tomes 2004, p. 115).

In Estonia, there were ~10,000 registered associations by 2004 (RIK), in Latvia by 2006 (Lursoft 2011) and in Lithuania only recently (Department of Statistics 2011). These numbers reflect more than mere differences in the size of population. They, additionally, indicate either the existence or the lack of what we may call a critical mass of CSOs needed in order to function as a social force, no matter how multifunctional the character of these organizations. The growth rates of organizations in the countries discussed show considerable variance suggesting also differences in the capacity of CSOs to establish themselves and take up an active role in the political system.

In the process of domestication of the idea of civil society, it is the main translators of this model, the actors on the local level, who play a key role in the shaping of its concrete form and influence (e.g. Alasuutari 2011a). The critical mass of civil society representatives emerged in the Central European countries almost 15–20 years earlier than in the Baltic countries. This, in turn, has had an impact on the institutionalization of civic initiative. In Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, CSOs already became a visible social force in the early 1990s when the governmental and other public institutions were restructured. The post-Soviet Baltic states had to start state-building almost from the very beginning, and this process, hence, was far more extensive than in Central Europe, lasting at least until the end of the 1990s. During this period, the influence of civic initiative was not present in this state-building process. As a result, in Central-Eastern Europe, civil society enjoyed and continues to enjoy considerably closer relations with public institutions than in the Baltic states. When the state was restructured in Central-Eastern Europe, organizations were given due consideration through various financing schemes and in the process of privatization (e.g. Kuti 1996, 2001; Anheier and Seibel 1998; Potucek 2000). In the Baltic states, the public sector and CSOs acted in parallel without extensive relations and co-operation at least until the turn of the century.

Legal Definitions and Types of CSOs

There is no single term in use that would fully capture the complex nature of civic initiatives. Similarly, there is considerable variety across the discussed CEE countries in defining civic initiative. Differences exist in the legal framework, policies as well as practices. The first obvious difference is also the most basic one,

concerning the legal definitions of different types of CSOs. Indeed, there are two fundamental legal forms of CSOs: associations and foundations. Associations are, traditionally, organizations that are based on membership and are formed to serve the interests of the members or those of the public. Foundations, by contrast, are established on the basis of property, the use of which promotes a specific cause or purpose. While associations are governed by members or their representatives, decisions in foundations are, as a rule, taken by nominated boards.

Looking at further categorizations of organizational types in these six countries allows us to distinguish, broadly speaking, between two main legal approaches: the more liberal and the more regulative approach. The liberal legal categorization prefers to distinguish between only 2–3 types of organizations leaving them relatively free to act as legal persons under the civil law (e.g. Köve 1996, p. 555). The regulative division defines additional organizational forms and, hence, offers a more detailed and heterogeneous legal typology of organizations, adding as separate legal entities, for instance, public benefit companies, investment funds, open foundations, etc. (e.g. Rutzen et al. 2009). This, in turn, necessitates and makes it possible to implement a series of additional laws and regulations (including tax legislation, procurement laws, legislation governing social service delivery, etc.). As we see in Table 1, the Baltic countries have opted for a more liberal, and the Visegrad countries for a more regulative approach to the legal categorization of CSOs. The most important consequence of these different approaches is that in the latter, the proportion of organizations more closely related to public institutions and with a formally stated public mission is higher than in the former.

In addition, regulations and practices of registration of organizations vary significantly across the region. In some countries, like in Estonia, there is a single national registry; while in others, like in the Czech Republic, there are separate registries for separate types of organizations. In Hungary, a comprehensive registry appears to be lacking altogether (Rutzen et al. 2009, pp. 40–41). Both the different systems of categorization of CSOs as well as the practices of registering have

Table 1 Common CSO organizational forms

Country	Association	Foundation	Other
Czech Republic	Civil association, interest association of legal entities	Foundation, fund	Public benefit company, public institution, charitable establishment
Estonia	Non-profit association	Foundation	Non-profit partnership
Hungary	Association, social organization	Foundation, open foundation	Non-profit company, public foundation, public society
Latvia	Association	Foundation	Public non-profit organization
Lithuania	Association	Charity and sponsorship fund, foundation	Public institution
Poland	Association, simple association	Foundation	Public benefit company

The table uses data presented in Rutzen et al. (2009), p. 34

resulted in virtually incomparable collection of data regarding the number, types and fields of activities of organizations, as well as regarding the changes in the latter over the past decades. There is also considerable diversity as to the rules of registering an association. In Poland, no less than fifteen initial founders must be present to register an association, in Hungary ten, in the Czech Republic and Lithuania three, and in Estonia and Latvia only two founders are required by law (Rutzen et al. 2009, pp. 36–37). The legal regulation of minimum membership size of CSOs tends to favour certain types of organizations, such as small voluntary associations, over others, and hence also plays a role in the shaping of the civic sector as whole.

Consolidation and Partnerships in the Civic Sector

The legal environments of the civic sectors in the region have been shaped much more systematically and during a shorter period than those in Western Europe or North America (Salamon, Anheier et al. 1999, p. 34; Alapuro 2010b, p. 309). Therefore, the different influences at play may in the post-socialist countries be more easily identifiable than elsewhere. We can see how the changing legal environments and the categories-typologies that they create exercise a notable influence on the types of organizations that emerge and activities that these undertake. Different legal frameworks in the considered countries give rise to civic sectors that vary both in orientation and functions.

As mentioned above, in the Czech Republic and particularly in Poland, the civic associations are, traditionally, strongly present providers of social services. In Poland, this partly means being part of the social network of the Catholic Church, but partly this social function has been delegated to the sector by the state institutions (Koldinska and Tomes, 2004, p. 115). This is reflected also in how and with whom CSOs co-operate. According to the data collected in 2006, the most common partners of CSOs in Poland are the representatives of the local community (about 85 % mention local partners), public institutions such as schools, hospitals or museums (77 %), local governments on the communal and district level (63 %), the local media (50 %), while there is less co-operation with other CSOs. Every third organization claims it has no contact at all with other CSOs (Facts and numbers...2006). In the Polish study, respondents were asked only about contacts and not about regular co-operation. Regular partners of organizations were studied in Estonia, characterized by the liberal legal definition of the CSO sector. Here, both foundations (62 % of the respondents) and associations (59 %) co-operate most frequently with other CSOs. Amongst other regular partners, local governments were mentioned by 60 % of associations and 48 % of foundations, followed by partners in the business sector (23 and 45 %, respectively), governmental institutions (15 and 42 %, respectively) and only then by schools, media and other partners (Rikmann et al. 2010, pp. 100–101)

Different integrative patterns within the civic sector emerge also from the data regarding the CSOs and their belonging in umbrella organizations. In Poland, only 34 % of organizations are members of different kinds of branch, regional or

nationwide federations, agreements and unions (Facts and numbers...2006). In Estonia, 69 % of associations and foundations belong to umbrella organizations (Rikmann et al. 2010). This is all the more striking in the light of the fact that in Estonia, neither the legal regulations nor the national policy programmes give any advantages to either the umbrella organizations or their members as compared to other organizations.

Although the existing data do not permit the making of far-reaching conclusions, the data still suggest how different legal definitions tend to shape the focus of activities of CSOs. The formal definition of an organization directs them to certain potential financial donors rather than others, binds CSOs to certain fields of activities and partners, while making other choices less likely. These tendencies seem, moreover, to persist also in the long term and shape the concrete form and social role that the civil societies have come to take in these six countries. They also raise a whole range of questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of different models. For instance, the closer relations between the state and the CSOs in Central Europe may jeopardize the latter's capacity and willingness to act as 'watchdogs' with regard to the state. At the same time, while the development of the civic sector in the Baltic states has taken place relatively independently from the public sector, this also undermines the capacity of CSOs to participate in the policy-making processes. Organizations lack regular relations with political decision makers and are often seen as representatives of private interest groups rather than key participants in the public sphere.

Changing Practices and Perceptions of Public–Civic Sector Partnership

A closer look at the evolvement of the relations between CSOs and the public sector similarly reveals that there is no single civil society model that has been implemented in these six countries, but a variety of different approaches and concrete policy measures. Nonetheless, in none of the countries has the partnership been unproblematic and the reasons for these problems are deeply embedded in the particular contexts.

Before 1989 and in its immediate aftermath, civil movements in Eastern and Central Europe emerged in opposition to the state authority as such. In the following years, however, one of the major lessons that the civic sector in these countries had to inevitably learn was how to co-operate with the public institutions (Kuti 1993). In seeking co-operation with the public sector, the civil society has had to aim not only at strengthening its own position or at achieving specific policy objectives, but also at political, legal and administrative reforms (Alapuro 2010b, p. 309).

In the late 1990s, when there had already been notable progress in the legal reforms, the institutionalization of public–civic sector co-operation was increasingly present on the policy agenda. Nonetheless, existing measures such as strategic documents and programmes were rarely perceived as more than of declaratory value. For instance, even if governmental institutions were obliged by law to send legislative drafts to various interested parties, the obligation lacked the guarantee by any specific sanction (Miezaine 2003, pp. 26–39). The extent and frequency of

co-operation between central or local authorities and CSOs varied immensely between particular fields of activity and geographical regions. It depended on the political willingness and experience of not only a particular institution, but also particular public officials (Ojala 2004, pp. 36–42). There were encouraging single examples of efficient co-operation, yet there was also a lack of clear rules on the parties' rights and obligations. In reality this allowed authorities to be selective, if not even arbitrary in their choice of partners and the level of their engagement. Hence, co-operation tended to depend extensively on personal contacts. Also, often the first initiatives to make public–civic sector partnership a regular practice—and moreover, to formalize such practices in regulations and strategic policy documents—came from professionalized CSOs funded by foreign donors, and hence represented a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach to institutional change (Lagerspetz and Rikmann 2009).

By today, all of the six discussed countries have not only declared a viable civic sector one of the pillars of democratic society, but also have introduced concrete measures to support its development. Although these represent more recent developments, we can already point out a number of differences in approaches in how the social and public role of CSOs or channels for public–civic sector co-operation have been defined.

In terms of financial support, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania have introduced tax schemes according to which taxpayers may donate of their taxes to CSOs of their choice. In addition, the public role of CSOs is recognized through legislative initiatives and/or strategic documents adopted on the governmental or parliamentary level. In Poland, for instance, the legal, financial and institutional conditions for CSOs to operate, as well as the duties of public institutions to work with them, are stipulated by the Law on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism (Gerasimova 2005, pp. 6–8). The law, however, focuses on service provision and leaves other types of CSOs at a disadvantage (Szczepanski 2003). Hungary, by contrast, has adopted the Strategy Paper of the Government in Civil Society. Central for the Strategy were the establishment of the National Civil Fund and adopting the Law on Volunteering, both of which are in place today (Hadzi-Miceva 2008, p. 9). In Lithuania, there were, until recently, only rather general legal provisions in place for the institutionalization of CSO participation in decision and policy making such as provisions regulating access to information and allowing the civic sector to be represented in the policy process. In 2009, however, the Government adopted a policy programme to support civil society development (Nacionalines nevyriausybinu organizaciju...2009, p. 6).

While it is still too early to tell what will be the results of the new policy programme in Lithuania, the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept (EKAK), a framework document adopted by the Parliament in 2002, has become a major milestone in CSO-public sector co-operation (Gerasimova 2005, p. 19; Randma-Liiv et al. 2008 etc.). Initiated by CSOs, the document was devised after the models of the British Compacts and the Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector. It articulates the main obligations and rights of both the representatives of the public and non-profit sector, including those related to representation of civil society in the policy-making process. As EKAK has

become a widely recognized framework, it does indeed seem to have succeeded in encouraging civic–public sector co-operation. For instance, while until the late 1990s, there was even frequent mention of ‘hostility’ to CSOs on the side of the public sector (Lagerspetz and Rikmann 2008), by 2006, 92 % of Estonian civil servants declared that they find such co-operation necessary (Hadzi-Miceva 2008, p. 11). EKAK has also played an important role in raising the self-awareness and self-confidence of CSOs: It has helped them clarify their aims, their social role and set their activities in a broader context (Rikmann et al. 2010). Its relative success suggests that there may be a difference in the level of commitment between a governmental policy document as was drafted in Hungary and one adopted by the Parliament. The former expresses the strategic priorities of a particular governmental coalition (e.g. Bocz 2009, p. 129), while the latter gives civic initiative political recognition that is expected to last beyond an election period.

The evolvement of public–civic sector relationship in the region over the past two decades has been shaped by a whole variety of factors including the extensive changes implemented in the functioning of the public service as such, often almost a generational change amongst civil servants, changing perceptions about civil initiative and its public role, the development and strengthening of CSOs as a social force, as well as a variety of different political discourses and concerns underlying different stages of transition and post-transition. The ‘Western’ concept of civil society as an essential element of sustainable democracies has never been simply adopted and implemented as such in practice. Over the years, or even decades, when the model has been—at slow pace—‘domesticated’, it has at the same time been shaped by local backgrounds, experiences and interests. For instance, in comparison with Western Europe, the civic sector in CEE countries continues to receive substantially less central and local budgetary support, and this is not only due to differences in financial capacities, but also due to a different perception of the role and functioning of CSOs including their relations with the state (Kuti 1998, p. 28). At the same time, it is not only the willingness (or the lack of it) on either the side of civil servants or CSOs that hinders or fosters co-operation, but also skills to do so and the routinization of relevant practices. This results not only in a variety of ways in how these civil societies operate, but also in how they are engaged in and accounted for in the broader socio-political contexts.

Common Challenges–New Challenges

Even if there are improved procedures in place to involve the civic sector in the policy process and CSOs themselves have gained more expertise knowledge over the past years, these developments still concern only a small part of the sector—mainly the more professionalized non-membership organizations (Rikmann et al. 2010, pp. 129–131). This is a reflection of one of the new major challenges that the civic sector in the region is facing: increasing differentiation within the civil society itself. Professionalization—a trend that contrary to expectations has not become characteristic of the civic sector as such (e.g. Mendelson and Glenn 2002, pp. 21–22)—is the advantage that still only a fragment of CSOs enjoy, while it still

plays a crucial role in the organizations' capacity to become, as well as to define themselves as, public actors (Rikmann et al. 2010, pp. 100–105). For instance, for a young membership association, it is still unlikely to be engaged in decision-making, even on the local level. On the one hand, the more professionalized CSOs that form a distinct minority in the context of the sector as a whole are indeed gaining an ever-clearer voice and role in the society. On the other hand, it has remained as difficult as ever for a typical membership association to find support in becoming a recognized social actor. In what follows, we will discuss increasing differentiation within the sector as reflected in such trends as decreasing membership and the increasing number of single-issue organizations—and ask about the reasons behind these trends as well as their possible implications. We will also draw attention to what we believe is a further challenge, still to be tackled in many CSOs in the region—the reluctantly changing organizational culture. Some of these issues are an expression of the persistence of post-socialist legacy, others of the more recent wider social and even legal developments shaping the course of civil society institutionalization.

Membership Size

The CEE voluntary associations typically have a smaller membership than their Western counterparts (Inglehart 1997, p. 190; Ledeneva 1998; Howard 2002, 2003; Uhlin 2010; Huber 2011 etc.). Moreover, the average membership size seems to be decreasing in the region rather than increasing. For instance, according to an Estonian study conducted in 2004, the average size of respondent organizations (the median) was 31 members, while in 2009–2010, it was 20 members. In addition to the decreasing average membership size, also the average number of active members in organizations is falling. Similarly, the average number of board members is decreasing: While in 1997, respondent association had on average 7 board members, in 2004, this had fallen to 4.4 members and in 2009, to 3.9 board members (Rikmann et al. 2010, pp. 62–63).

In Latvia, the majority of associations have between 10 and 25 active members (NGO Directory: Latvia). Lithuanian associations have even smaller average membership size. According to a study conducted in 2007, 67 % of organizations have 8 or less members, and only 10 % have 9–15 members (NVO sektoriaus...2007). This situation is excluded in Poland, however, where unlike in the Baltic states, the law requires that a voluntary association has minimum 15 members. Nevertheless, in 2006, half of organizations in Poland reported to having no more than 36 members, which is 10 members less than according to a study conducted in 2002 (Facts and numbers...2006).

The greater proportion of small voluntary associations in the region has been explained in a number of ways. Ledeneva (1998) refers to widespread suspicion and mistrust towards all public organizations. Howard (2003) argues that civil passivity can be explained by attachment to one's private networks as well as by mistrust of the public sphere. Yet, studies on Estonian civil society conducted over the past two decades show that even though the membership size of voluntary associations continues to decrease, indicators of social trust as well as the participation of

organizations in the public sphere have considerably improved over time (Lagerspetz and Rikmann 2008, 2009). How to explain this? First, it is important to note that decreasing membership of organizations is a trend that is not only perceivable in the CEE region, but also a more widely spread phenomenon traced back to the wider changes in values and social practices (Putnam 2000; Papakostas 2003). Second, as Kopecky and Mudde have argued, it would be mistaken to believe that organizational density (i.e. membership) equates with organizational intensity. More members does not necessarily mean more active participation and vice versa (2006, p. 7). Third, the decrease of the membership size can also be understood as reflecting the still ongoing transformations in the CSO environment as well as in its organizational culture.

Single-Issue Organizations and Specialization

One of the main concerns often raised in the context of explaining the weakness of civil society in the region is that it has a high proportion of single-issue organizations (see also Petrova and Tarrow 2007, p. 78), which allegedly fails to widen civil participation. Data collected in Estonia allow, however, a slightly different interpretation. Organizations founded in the 1990s had very broad and comprehensive statutes, and they tried to expand their activities in many possible fields and directions. Organizations emerging later, by contrast, had, from the beginning, a more focused idea of their specific goals and activities (Lagerspetz and Rikmann 2008, pp. 32–38). Hence, the later specialization and focussing of activities reflect the consolidation of both the field of CSOs' expertise and its social role. Also, Petrova and Tarrow (2007) argue for an increasing 'transactional activism' in the CEE region as an alternative to conventional ideas about the role and function of CSOs. They particularly highlight the fact that while individual participation and state support of civic initiative is low in these countries, and many emerging organizations are focused on particular problems instead of engaging in broader social issues, there is remarkably high co-operation and networking within the CSO sector. This, in turn, they argue, reflects the alternative dynamics and strengths of CEE civic sector as compared to its Western counterparts.

Yet again—this often concerns only a minority of more professionalized CSOs, amongst whom the grass-root organizations crucial for the broader civic activism and participation are rather an exception than a rule. So, the problem is less the emergence of single-issue organizations as such, but whether these will also include a considerable number of grass-root initiatives, on the one hand, and whether such initiatives possess the resources and skills to gain a voice in the public sphere, on the other.

Organizational Culture: Can We Ignore the Micro-Level?

One of the underlying normative presumptions of research on civil society has been the view that CSOs facilitate an informed and proactive citizenry (de Tocqueville 1969; Almond and Verba 1989; Cohen and Arato 1995; Putnam et al. 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996 etc.). Perhaps because this idea has become so widely accepted,

even self-evident, the questions of organizational culture, internal development as well as the precise mechanisms that should produce the desired form of civil society have received considerably less attention.

As a part of the society, civic initiative in its characteristics, values and behaviour is to a lesser or greater extent shaped by the environment in which it operates (Alapuro 2010a, pp. 16–17). Even if both legal and political reforms have, in the formal sense, turned both the Visegrad and the Baltic countries into stable liberal democracies, the process of consolidating the institutions and the rule of law is ongoing. It is, hence, characteristic of the post-socialist societies to still lack the experience of stable rules and norms. The process of civil society building in the region has not remained unaffected by the fact that its members tend to more readily accept authoritarian tendencies in governance and prefer ‘strong leaders’, define interests monopolistically and lack experience in different forms of self-organization of citizens (e.g. Von Zon 1994, pp. 153–161; Schöpflin 1994; Miszlivetz and Ertsey 1998, pp. 77–80). The organizational culture changes reluctantly, partly because it is less likely, than for instance accountability to donors, to be affected by external factors. Also, there is still considerable distrust towards politics and institutions on the part of the citizens, which makes it even more difficult to create institutions that seek political influence (e.g. Lagerspetz 2009).

Even if the internalization of new norms and laws presumes first their emergence and existence, the unwritten rules, as it were, values and new behavioural patterns take a long time to change (Linz and Stepan 1996; Hadenius and Ugglå 1996, pp. 1622–1623).

Democratic deficit is characteristic of the post-totalitarian societies not only on the macro-level, but also on the micro-level: in our context, of the daily relations and practices of people and their associations (Lagerspetz 2007). In the autocratic regimes, definitions of interests, ideology and socio-moral issues had been monopolized by the one-party state. With the collapse of the autocratic regimes, there emerged a new need for the legitimization and normalization of plurality of opinions. Their denationalization and the legitimization of pluralism as well as the consolidation of democratic values and norms in membership organizations has been a time-demanding process, and it seems that it can only be the result of daily practices and lessons learned therefrom. In addition to studying individual participation in civic initiative, as is most commonly done, we should therefore—in order to understand the dynamics of the development of civic societies—investigate also the strategies of organized joint action. It is particularly the willingness and skills to co-operate that the totalitarian regimes damaged and the re-emergence of which they put at risk.

Conclusion

We have given a comparative overview of some of the more recent developments in the civil societies in six Eastern and Central European countries. Our aim has been to look behind the façade of the relative homogeneity as well as to critically reassess some of the weaknesses and strengths attributed to the civic sectors in the region. By

adopting an organization-centred perspective, we sought to show that the domestication of the transnational model of civil society has varied across these six countries. In this process, pre-transformational experience in civic initiative, the scope and duration of political and social change, legal definitions of organizational forms and relations between civic initiative and public institutions during the initial phase of the transformation period have played a crucial role.

We also examined the various measures in these six countries, which seek to strengthen civic society and consolidate its co-operation with the public sector. Few countries in the region have opted for a more stable framework such as the Law on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism in Poland and EKAK adopted by the Parliament in Estonia. Partnership agreements and strategic programmes adopted on the governmental level are more common. Although the CSO sectors and their operational environments have been developed more systematically in the CEE countries than in ‘older democracies’, they do not follow a standard model, but grow in different directions. Differences appear on the level as basic as the regulations concerning volunteering or the definition of public benefit status.

We discussed some of the common challenges that the civic sectors in the region are facing, in particular problems reflected in such key parameters of CSOs as their membership size and activity focus. Globally, there has been a notable tendency towards short-term civic initiatives, and this is likely to have its roots in a number of wider changes, such as the increase in project-based activities in many fields. The same trends are very likely to have influenced the membership size of CSOs. Especially lately, the average number of members has considerably decreased in the countries analysed. This questions the idea of unidirectional development, for instance, the presumption that as the civic sector consolidates, organizations grow in size and capability involving ever greater proportion of the population. However, the ever-increasing differentiation within the civic sector has not yet been extensively studied, and hence questions such as: which type of organizations are improving or losing their operational capacities, and how does this impact the role of the sector as a whole, call for further future research.

The potential for expressing heterogeneous interests and political plurality that triggered the revolutionary events two decades ago has not vanished from Eastern and Central Europe. On the contrary, all the discussed countries have made an effort to create structures that preserve and foster plurality. The question is rather, how rapidly and in which particular ways have they chosen to or succeeded in realizing this potential.

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