

CIVIL SOCIETY – A KEY ELEMENT OF THE POST-COLD – WAR ZEITGEIST

CIVIC SOCIETY STRUCTURE IN BULGARIA

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Background

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the endeavors of Central and Eastern Europe countries to construct or reconstruct civil society as part of the liberation of their nations illustrates the importance attached to the idea. The global tendency towards democracy further raised the significance of civil society in the transition of post-socialist countries.

Since the 1990s, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged in every post-socialist country as an important force working to democratize the decision-making process, protect human rights and provide essential services to the most needy.

Traditionally, civil society is conceived of as an essential condition of democracy. Some arguments come close to seeing civil society and citizenship as the defining conditions of democracy. In fact, civil society is only one component of democracy, albeit an important one.

The concept of civil society

In this article I will use the definition of civil society proposed by Martin Shaw. He states that civil society is a "sphere of association in society in distinction to the state, involving a network of institutions through which

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society and groups within it represent themselves in cultural, ideological and political senses". (the Encyclopaedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict: 269-78)

If we consider the term historically, we encounter many different definitions of "civil society". For example, in the works of Cicero, other Romans and ancient Greek philosophers they equated the term with the state.²

The Latin notion of 'civilis societas' referred to communities that conformed to norms that rose above and beyond the laws of the state. But the origins of the modern concept of civil society lie in certain key stages of modernity, primarily those occurring at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³

A great number of political theorists from Thomas Paine to Georg Hegel developed the concept of civil society as a domain parallel, separate from the state and where citizens affiliate according to their own interests and wishes. This new thinking reverberated changing industrial circumstances: the rise of private property, market competition and the bourgeoisie. It also grew out of the promoted exigency for liberty, as seen in the American and French revolutions.⁴

The term fell into disuse in the mid-19th century as political philosophers turned their attention to the social and political consequences of the industrial revolution.⁵ It bounced back into fashion after World War II in the writings of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci,⁶ who revived the term to portray civil society as a distinctive premise of independent political activity, a crucial sphere of struggle against tyranny.

Gramsci built a comparative theory of political change around the concept of civil society. He argued that in the East, where civil society was weak, revolution might have succeeded through a direct violent assault on the state (as in Russia in 1917). In the West, however, where civil society was strong, this would not be possible. The institutions of civil society formed the 'outer earthworks' of the state, through which the ruling classes

² See "Think Again: Civil Society" By Thomas Carothers published in Foreign Policy Magazine, Winter 1999-2000 edition

³ See "Civil Society" by Lester Kurtz, ed, Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflicts, San Diego: Academic Press, pp. 269-78

⁴ See "Civil Society, Ethnicity and the State: a threefold relationship" by George Schopflin. This paper was presented at the conference, *Civil Society in Austria*, Vienna, 20-21 June 1997

⁵ See the article "The Global Associational Revolution: The Rise of the Third Sector on the World Scene" by Lester M. Salamon p. 1993 / CCSS-WP-4 published in <http://www.jhu.edu/~ccss/pubs/ccsswork/>

⁶ See Cohen, J. L. *Class and Civil Society: The limits of Marx's critical Theory*. Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1983.

maintained their ‘hegemony’ or dominance in society.⁷ It was thus necessary to transform civil society in order to create an alternative hegemony of the subordinated classes, primarily to challenge state power.

Gramsci’s hegemonic theory⁸ of civil society saw transformation as a cultural as well as political process and specified an important role for intellectuals. According to Gramsci,⁹ each class developed its own intellectual groupings. While some traditional groups, such as priests and lawyers, continued from previous phases of society, many new groups had been created ‘organically’ through the development of capitalism – managers, educators, social workers, etc. These groups, playing central roles in the institutions of civil society, contributed to maintaining the existing hegemony. A counter-hegemony, which Gramsci conceived of in Marxist terms, i.e., led by the working class, would require its own organic intellectuals and beliefs.

Gramsci’s ideas were instrumental in the 1970s, for Western social-science academics and in motivating the ‘Eurocommunist’ strategy of the Italian and numerous other West European Communist parties.¹⁰ Another strong stimulus in the development of civil society thinking originated in the same period from oppositional thinkers in the Socialist states of East-Central Europe. In an advance on Gramsci’s ideas, many oppositionists recognised the difficulty of a direct challenge on the legitimacy of the communist regimes as a result of their authoritarian character. It would thus be easier to develop civil society around cultural institutions that made an indirect challenge to the values of the system.

In the more liberal situation of the late 1990s, however, civil society ‘mushroomed’ in many Socialist countries. The growth of autonomous cultural and social institutions prepared the foundations for a challenge to political power, as Gramsci had previously argued.¹¹ As Communism collapsed and competitive party politics developed, key intellectual elites moved from civil society to political parties and the state, leading to a crisis in civil society practice and thinking. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, the

⁷ See Ekiert, Grzegorz (1996) *The state against society : political crises and their aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press) GUL Sov Stud OE30 1996-E

⁸ See “Four Conceptions of the State” by Antonio Gramsci, published in www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/soc/courses/soc2r3/gramsci/gramindx.htm

⁹ See “Selections from Political Writings (1910-1920)”. With additional texts by Bordiga and Tasca. Selected and edited with an Introduction by Quentin Hoare. Translated by John Mathews. London & New York: Lawrence & Wishart; International Publishers, 1977. Pp. xxi-393. [Repr. U. of Minnesota Press, 1990].

¹⁰ See Ekiert, Grzegorz (1996) *The state against society : political crises and their aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press) GUL Sov Stud OE30 1996-E

¹¹ See “Four Conceptions of the State” by Antonio Gramsci, published in www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/soc/courses/soc2r3/gramsci/gramindx.htm

more advanced Central European countries were characterised by more extensive civil societies (based on voluntary associations) than was the case a decade earlier, although the political significance of these civil societies changed.

Implicit in these ideas of civil society was the notion that it was a sphere of peaceful civility in contrast to the coercion, authoritarianism and violence of non-democratic states. At the end of the twentieth century then the development of civil society is viewed as a significant criterion for the development of democracy. Democracy entails more than the formal establishment of certain rights, institutions and procedures, despite their importance. It similarly requires the consolidation of the social relations that support these. These supports include the development of an educated middle class and a framework of civil institutions that can support democracy. For former Socialist states and many countries of the 'Third World' democratisation has advanced in the last decade of the twentieth century and the creation of civil society is widely viewed as a concomitant of democratic change.

After the 1990s, civil society became a 'hub' for everyone from presidents to political scientists. The global trend towards democracy opened up a path for civil society in the former Socialist countries of South Eastern Europe.

The crash of communism also brought with it the crash of the Socialist State, which claimed to be the greatest 'aggrandizement of rationality'.¹² Etatism, whether associated with the left or the right, has been increasingly rejected. Such questions, manifesting themselves with some urgency, are recent additions to the political agenda and demand a thorough reappraisal.

Likewise, the outline, contents and processes of civil society are equally shaped by its own bearings, aspirations, successes and miscarriages, not to mention traditions and rituals. The intellectual and operational range of civil society then is far from unlimited, but is bounded by other actors on the stage and by the way in which it understands its own history.¹³

¹² See Ekiert, Grzegorz (1996) *The state against society : political crises and their aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press) GUL Sov Stud OE30 1996-E

¹³ See "Globalisation and Civil Society: NGO Influence in International Decision-Making"- Discussion Paper No. 83, April 1997 , written by Riva Krut, with the assistance of Kristin Howard, Eric Howard, Harris Gleckman and Danielle Pattison

Non-government organizations as organized appearances of civil society: Different categories of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Civil society is often described as a return to reciprocity in political and social arrangements, as well as the third force through which the traditional hierarchy of state and subject can be unseated. The term is used somewhat more rigorously by political scientists to encompass all those components of society - and all those arrangements within it - that exist outside the state's reach or instigation. Presently, the most widespread understanding of civil society is as the promoter of a range of political and social goals. In short, civil society simultaneously encompasses everything that is not the state and represents a set of inherently democratic values.

The term NGO is very broad and includes many different types of organizations. In the field of development they include research institutes, churches, professional associations and lobby groups. The World Bank classifies NGOs into two categories:¹⁴

a) *operational* NGOs - whose primary purpose is the design and implementation of development-related projects;

b) *advocacy* NGOs - whose primary purpose is to defend or promote a specific cause and who seek to influence policies and practices. (Below I will focus in more detail on advocacy action as opposed to policy dialogue between civil society and state institutions in Bulgaria).

It should be noted, however, that these two categories are not mutually exclusive. A growing number of NGOs engage in both operational and advocacy activities, and some advocacy groups, while not directly involved in designing and implementing projects, focus on specific project-related concerns.

There is also another group of NGOs: think tanks. Their work concentrates on reconciling the needs of citizens with the realities of politics and limited resources. Think tanks can be viewed as a type of 'invention in government' or "islands of excellence applying full-time interdisciplinary scientific thinking to the in-depth improvement of policymaking, acting as a main bridge between power and knowledge."¹⁵ The principal customer of think tanks is government. Since their agenda focuses on the improvement of public policy, think tanks must forge close relations with government. Other customers include the media and business communities. In providing news and analysis focused on political risks as well as environmental and economic issues, many think tanks consider the private sector and public media as their most important constituencies.

¹⁴ See the report of the World Bank "NGO World Bank Collaboration" published in www.worldbank.org

¹⁵ See "How think tanks improve public policy" Erik C. Johnson in www.cipe.org

Existing Mechanisms for the Civic Representation of Interests in Bulgaria.

In societies, such as the Balkans, where many different historical phenomena have created a greater than usual distrust between the government and people, the gap between the two is usually filled by one of two things: either a resilient and kinship-based traditional society or a civil society. Bulgaria has both, but in a less than traditional mix. After the demolition of the former socialist regime, modern mechanisms for the civic representation of interests have attempted to find practical application in Bulgaria. Thus far, the public has been rather unsuccessful in developing an active civic approach in order to effectively and efficiently solve acute problems.

Civil society is the third sector of community alongside the state and the market. A dynamic civil society represents an important counter-balance to government and business. Non-attendance to the elementary principals of a market economy, publicity and democratic state institutions as well as the absence of a civic culture based on voluntary association are the inheritance of Bulgaria's totalitarian past¹⁶.

The gap between people wanting to participate (high) and actual participation (low) is nearly insurmountable. This perception, reinforced by donors and intermediaries seeking funding, has adverse consequences; it undervalues the many achievements of NGOs and discourages new initiatives that could further strengthen their contributions. It also ignores the reality that changing political cultures is a long-term and time-consuming process, requiring considerable time before those changes are cemented in society.¹⁷

Remarkably, changing political culture has in fact been accelerated, in part stimulated by the serious exchange occurring between European Union countries and North America, particularly the U.S., and Bulgarian participants.

NGOs are recognizing that there is a vast difference between having "connections" to influence outcomes and building relationships that flow from public and institutional responsibilities. Connections are personal (based on favoritism), not always fair and, at times extralegal, if not illegal.

The existing mechanisms for the public representation of interests in Bulgaria suffers as a result of deeply rooted insufficiencies:

¹⁶ See Evgenii Dainov " Politicheskiat debat I prehodat v Balgaria " in Bulgarian, "The political debate and transition in Bulgaria", Sofia, 2000

¹⁷ See Blaga Taneva "Balgarskata Politicheska Kiltyra. Tradicii I savreennost", published in Bulgarian , "Bulgarian Political Culture. The traditions and contemporarily. "Sofia 2002

- *lack of sufficient democratic traditions in civic representation*

After the collapse of communism we observe a large-scale ‘regeneration’ of civil action in Bulgaria. Many active citizens, intellectuals, teachers and students from universities, including some state servants, were directly involved in several NGOs.¹⁸ 1990 heralded a period of ‘change’ whereby the entire state administration, central plane economic principals and educational programs were ‘cleaned’ of outmoded rhetoric, etc. On the other hand, the process of internal transformation in state institutions had not yet been completed. Insufficient democratization and the absence of defined “rules of the game” determined the logic of Bulgarian transition.¹⁹

The inherited and profound indifference for the development and efficiency of the state sector combined with the lack of transparent public mechanisms in the decision making process and the imitation of democratic correction, led to the creation of incapable of state institutions at the national, regional and local levels. The absence of accessible and reliable public institutions created for protecting the common civic interest reinforced existing institutions and the idea of the state as a servant ‘for’ and ‘to’ itself.²⁰

- *resolution of problems is sought through mobilization of kinship relationships rather than reliance on modern mechanisms of civil representation*

This principal is a direct analogy of the aforementioned position. Commonly, the fervor of kinship relationships in the former socialist countries resulted in an under-developed public sector and minimal civic activity within it. The strength of kinship relationships then is a direct consequence of an undeveloped civic culture in a traditional society with a high degree of personalization of state institutions.²¹

Current Overview of Bulgarian NGOs: The Size of the NGO Sector

By the end of 2000, Bulgaria had an adult population of 6.4 million and 4,500 registered NGOs, all of which were created after 1989. A comprehensive study conducted in 1999 indicates that 1,600 of these NGOs are active and no less than 700 are full-time organizations.²²

¹⁸ See Nagle, John D. & Mahr, Alison (1999) *Democracy and democratisation: post-communist Europe in comparative perspective* (London: Sage). Ch. 2: 14-40. GUL Sov Stud OE100 1999-N

¹⁹ See *Collecting “Bulgaria in NATO”*, IRIS, Sofia, 2002. Chapter 1, p. 15-45

²⁰ Engelbrekt, Kjell, "Bulgaria," RFE/RL Research Report 39 (1992): 32.

²¹ See ‘Grazhdanskoto obshestvo sreshty darzhavata-balgarskata sityacia’ - ‘Civil society versus the state-Bulgarian situation’ by Petya Kabakchieva, Sofia, 2001

²² See the collecting book “Bulgaria for NATO 2002”, IRIS, Sofia 2002, page 32- 36

The post-1989 NGO community attracts funding equivalent to 1.5 percent of the total GDP.²³ This is equal to the total national budget for the environment and is somewhat larger than the national budget for culture.

Most NGOs are set up with help from either US or EU-based donor organizations. Further, most of the influential NGOs continue to exist as a result of EU and US-funded projects, addressing a wide range of issues but focusing primarily on citizen and community empowerment in the decision-making and problem-solving process. This fact has led some researchers to conclude that the Bulgarian NGO community is above all a “political” one. In other words, it is dedicated to working out and pursuing, irrespective of the diverse NGO fields, agendas of civil society and empowerment as well as overcoming exclusion and discrimination.

The breakdown of data regarding the development of the NGO sector suggests that the number of functionally operating organizations²⁴ ranges between 350 and 500.²⁵ We can characterize the current situation in the following schema of configuration:

- group of interests, which are publicly protected; they could be mediated by other corporate interests or are a subject of situational mobilization;
- the institutional and technical base, which is established and developed at disproportionate levels;
- territorial representation, which is excessively uneven;
- the initial forms of introducing public relations practices in NGO activities;
- an adequate level of intensity of the dialogue with international institutions in the non-governmental sectoral sphere;

²³ See the collecting book “Bulgaria for NATO 2002”, IRIS, Sofia 2002, page 39

²⁴ (See the Analytical Research Report “INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE NGO SECTOR: ORGANIZATIONS WITH SOCIO-ECONOMIC ORIENTATION” published by CID, 1999 Sofia) This assessment has been made by the 1997 CSD survey, which filtered out organizations that do not work in the socioeconomic sphere at the first stage (i.e., reducing the total number to about 2,000 via the exclusion of organizations focused on sport, religion, trade union organizations, etc.) and then evaluating the actual performance of organizations. In 1998 MBMD adopted a similar approach in its survey of the NGO sector and obtained approximately the same results.

²⁵ In April 1997 a CSD survey surveyed 402 organisations after a preliminary selection of organisations that meet the four predefined DNP criteria. In a 1998 MBMD survey the number of organisations included is 530. After filtering out the organisations that are not engaged in activities focusing on civil society issues, 364 organisations remained.

- incomplete development of skills in fundraising and especially grant-making, with particular reference to the skills for effective management of finances in the sector;
- the initial attempts of non-profit marketing and social economy;
- relatively well-developed centers, i.e., “think tanks” with a raising influence in consulting and implementing civic initiatives.

The non-governmental sector in Bulgaria is demanding a greater intensification in terms of transfer of experience, resources, knowledge and personnel in the sphere of civic initiatives. The unbalanced development of NGOs (in terms of territoriality and with regards to the priorities of their activities) illustrates the necessity of establishing working mechanisms for overcoming the “center-periphery” dilemma. This outlines the first sphere in which endeavors could be modeled, aiming at influencing the development processes of NGOs.

In the early 1990s, two ascendant types of NGOs were formed. The first type encompasses those centers and institutes that are presently referred to as “think-tanks” or “research institutes.” The second type includes all the remaining NGOs, which covers the whole range of issues with which NGOs are typically concerned, e.g., charities, professional guilds, environmental pressure groups etc. Bulgaria’s political system, the media and the early business sector were formed together during this initial structuring of NGOs. In the early stages of the transitional period, connections between the activities of some dubious businesses and some of the first NGOs resulted in a wave of public mistrust towards NGOs, which were suspected of serving not public but private interests. This led directly to the withdrawal of favorable taxation regimes for NGOs. Today, NGOs still do not have tax-exempt status, and this undermines the development of the NGO sector.

In the mid-90s, conditions for the operation of NGOs further deteriorated as a result of a series of economic crises and of governments that were openly hostile towards NGOs. Among these the Socialist cabinet of 1995-1997 stands out as particularly hostile. It infiltrated NGO circles with its own agents, leading to the eventual break-up of the Union of Bulgarian Foundations, and appointed NGO “superintendents”, who were attached to various Ministries with the responsibility of following the organizations’ activities and reporting back to Ministers and government.

At the same time, the public consensus on the need to reform society in Bulgaria fragmented. Successive governments and the public abandoned reform agendas from 1993 onwards.²⁶ It was the NGO sector that filled the

²⁶ See “Bulgaria in NATO 2002”, IRIS, Sofia, 2002 p. 35-41

now empty reformist niche by acting as “the saviors of the democratic agenda”. In close partnership with the independent media, the leading NGOs from that period grew into a significant public force. They formed, maintained and defended reformist and democratic agendas in public debate, but also succeeded in leaving their stamp on the very manner in which the debate was conducted.

The role of the state is important in providing an overall framework for citizen participation and interaction and in mediating between different societal groups, organizations and classes. As a social space, civil society is distinct from the State sector, which may be narrowly defined as the legislative-executive-judicial system of authority and institutions. Yet it exists in co-relation to the state and views its primary relevance as antithetical to the state sector.

The central place of the state emanates from the historical nature and international functioning of a global system composed of sovereign Nation-States.²⁷ The state is seen as having specific sets of responsibilities that relate to the individual and the collective.

In recent years, the arena of NGO action has expanded from the local and national settings to the international level. The institutional transformations that are occurring in the context of globalization have resulted in international actors — such as United Nations agencies, regional organizations, finance and trade institutions and transnational corporations — as well as inter-governmental “summits” assuming an increasingly prominent role in global governance. NGOs have been late-comers to this evolving system of global governance but are now finding ways to influence the international decision-making process associated with development issues.

Conclusion

Evidently, the political and economic changes that are underway have extended the importance of the non-profit sector and brought it to the attention of policy makers. This expanding tendency, primarily visible in Western Europe, may perhaps spread to the Eastern European countries that apply for EU membership. Privatization efforts, the use of new public management and the need for innovations in social service delivery, health care and education entail a number of major challenges for this third sector. The governments are ‘down-sizing’ and are in the process of ‘off-loading’²⁸ some of their traditional tasks to private and non-profit institutions as well

²⁷ See ‘Globalization and Civil Society: NGO Influence in International Decision-Making’ the Discussion Paper No. 83, April 1997 Riva Krut, with the assistance of Kristin Howard, Eric Howard, Harris Gleckman and Danielle Pattison

²⁸ Helmut Anteier “The third sector in Europe: Five Theses” Civil Society Working paper 12, February 2002

as to commercial providers. In an era of budget-cutting, lean management and privatization efforts, the voluntary sector is confronted with great challenges and opportunities.

There are a vast array of goods and services that are either quasi-public or quasi-private. It is with reference to these goods that most of the current disagreement regarding the meaning and culture of collective goods occurs. Importantly, new organizational forms emerge, primarily in the contested terrain it is here that the vast majority of growth in the non-profit sector has occurred. It is then important to identify the attempts of a number of European countries to modernize association and corporate laws to allow for greater flexibility in the legal forms of not-for-profit organizations. In one way or another, they are all attempts to push the boundaries of current policies and laws²⁹.

In order to understand the relation between civil society and the state we have noted that civil society groups can be much more effective in shaping state policy if the state has coherent powers for setting and enforcing policy. Effective non-governmental advocacy work will strengthen rather than weaken state capacity.

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²⁹ See Helmut Anteier "The third sector in Europe: Five Theses" Civil Society Working paper 12, February 2002

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