

CIVIL SOCIETY – KEY ELEMENT OF POST–COLD –WAR ZEITGEIST.

(A SHORT BRIEF FOR CIVIC SOCIETY STRUCTURE IN BULGARIA.)

Elena Triffonova

Program Director

Institute for Regional and International Studies

Sofia, Bulgaria

Background

The overthrow of the Berlin Wall and the endeavors made in Central and Eastern Europe countries to construct or reconstruct civil society as the part of the liberation of their nations remakes this issue into the one of the most debatable topics in last twelve years. From the other side the global tendency toward democracy opened up the gap for civil society in post–socialist countries in transition.

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

Commonly civil society comprehends as an essential condition of democracy. Naturally, some arguments come close to seeing civil society and citizenship as the sole defining condition of democracy. In fact, civil society is only one component of democracy, though an important one.

A short brief about the concept of civil society

In the present article I will rely on the definition for civil society given by Martin Shaw like a "sphere of association in society in distinction to the state, involving a network of institutions through which society and groups within it represent themselves in cultural, ideological and political senses"

If we take a backward glimpse at the past we may encounter the different meanings of the term "civil society" in the works of Cicero and other Romans to the ancient Greek philosophers where they equated with the state.

The Latin notion of '*civilis societas*' referred to communities which 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 key stages of modernity in the end of eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The 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 as a sphere where citizens affiliate according to their own interests and wishes. This new thinking reverberates changing industrial substance: the rise of private property, market competition, and the bourgeoisie. It also grew out of the mounting promoted exigency for liberty, as manifested in the American and French revolutions.

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. It bounced back into fashion after World War II through the writings of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, 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 on this concept of civil society. He argued that whereas 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, 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 maintained their 'hegemony' or dominance in society. It was necessary to transform civil society, indeed to create an alternative hegemony of the subordinate classes, before it would be possible to challenge state power.

Gramsci's hegemonic theory of civil society saw transformation as a cultural, as well as political, process, and specified an important role for intellectuals. According to Gramsci, 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 as led by the working class, would require its own organic intellectuals and beliefs.

Gramsci's ideas were newly instrumental in the 1970s, both among Western social-science academics and in motivating the 'Eurocommunist' strategy of the Italian and some other West European Communist parties. Another strong stimulus to the development of civil society thinking came around the same time from oppositional thinkers in the Socialist states of East-Central Europe. In an whole advance on Gramsci's ideas, many oppositionists have no doubt that because the authoritarian character of the Communist regimes made a direct challenge to their legitimacy very difficult, it would be easier to develop civil society based on cultural institutions which made an indirect challenge to the values of the system.

In the more liberal situation of the later 1990s, however, civil society 'mushroomed' in many Socialist countries. The growth of autonomous cultural and social institutions played the role of preparing the foundations for a challenge to political power – very much as Gramsci had argued. As Communism collapsed and competitive party politics developed, however, key intellectual elites often moved from civil society to parties and the state, leading to a crisis of civil society practice and thinking. Nevertheless, the more advanced Central European countries, especially, are characterised in the late 1990s by much more extensive civil societies based on voluntary associations than was the case a decade earlier, although the political significance of these civil societies has changed.

Implicit in these ideas of civil society was the notion of it as a sphere of peaceful civility in contrast to the coercion, authoritarianism and violence of non-democratic states. At the end of the twentieth century the development of civil society is coming to be seen, therefore, as a significant criterion of the development of democracy. Democracy is seen as involving not merely the formal establishment of certain rights, institutions and procedures – important as these are – but also the consolidation of the social relations which support these. These supports include the development of an educated middle class and a framework of civil institutions which can support democracy. Just as in former Socialist states, so in many countries of the 'Third World': as democratisation has advanced in the last decade of the twentieth century, 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 toward democracy opened up a pattern for civil society in former Socialist countries in South Eastern Europe.

The crash of communism has also brought with it the crash of the Socialist State, which demanded to be the greatest ⇒aggrandizement of rationality⇒. Etatism, whether associated with the left or the right has been increasingly doubted. These are all new questions which have arrived with quite some urgency on the agenda and demand a far-reaching reappraisal.

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

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

Civil society is often described as a return to reciprocity in political and social arrangements, and 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 substances of society, and all those arrangements within it, that exist outside the state's reach or instigation. But in nowadays, the most widespread understanding of civil society is as the promoter for a range of political and social goals. In short, civil society has come, simultaneously, to be thought of as encompassing everything that is not the state and as representing a set of inherently democratic values.

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

- 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 the policies and practices. (Further on the focus of this article will be advocacy action promoted by non-governmental organizations, 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 another group of NGOs – so called think tanks which work is concentrated upon reconciling the needs of citizens with the realities of politics and limited resources. In fact, 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, as a main bridge between power and knowledge." The principal customer of think tanks is government. Since their agenda focuses on the improvement of public policy, think tanks must strive for close relations with government. And the other customers are the media and business communities. In providing news and analysis focused on political risks, environmental and economic issues, many think tanks consider the private sector and public media their most important constituency.

Existing Mechanisms of Civic Representation of Interests in Bulgaria.

In societies such as the Balkans, where many different historical phenomena have created greater than usual distrust between government and people, the gap between the two is usually filled by

one of two things: either a resilient and kinship-based on the principal of traditional society or a civil society. Bulgaria has both, but in a less than traditional mix. After the demolition of former socialist regime the modern mechanisms of civic representation of interests have tried to find practical application in Bulgaria. So far the public has failed to originate an active civic approach needed in order to bring successful solutions to acute problems.

Principally, the civil society is a third sector of community alongside the state and the market. A proven affirmation is that a dynamic civil society is an important counter-balance to government and business. Non-attendance of elementary principals of market economy, publicity and democratic regime of operation of state institutions as well as absence of principally civic culture for voluntary association were the received an inheritance from the socialist values in Bulgaria from the past.

There is the gap between people wanting to participate (high) and actual participation (low) is nearly insurmountable. Reinforced by donors and intermediaries seeking funding, the perception has adverse consequences because it undervalues the many achievements of NGOs and discourages new initiatives that could further strengthen their contributions to a more engaged and articulate population. It ignores the reality that changing political cultures is long-term and time consuming and that for the experience to “take” requires time.

What is remarkable is that the change in political culture in fact has been very accelerated, in part by the serious exchange occurring among European Union countries and North America, especially the U.S. and Bulgarian participants.

NGOs are beginning to lay the groundwork for, and building their experience on, the recognition that there is a vast difference between having “connections” to influence outcomes in contrast to building

relationships that flow from public and institutional responsibilities. Connections are personal, based on favoritism, not always fair and their use at times extralegal, if not illegal.

The existing mechanisms of public representation of interests in Bulgaria suffers deeply rooted insufficiencies:

- *lack of sufficient democratic traditions in civic representation;*

After the fall of communism we were observers of large-scale 'regeneration' of civil action in Bulgaria. Many active citizens, intellectuals, teachers and students from Universities even former state servants were directly involved in several forms of NGOs. In the beginning of '90 started the period of 'change' - the whole - state administration, central plane economic principals, educational programs were 'cleaned' from outmoded rhetoric and etc. From the other side started the process of inside transformation in state institutions that hadn't been completed. The insufficiency of democratization and the absences of affirmed "rules of the game" determinate the logic of Bulgarian transition.

The inherited profound indifference for the development and efficiency of state sector combined with the lack of transparent public mechanisms for the process of decision-making and imitation of democratic correction, brought about totally incapable structure of state institution in national, regional and local level. The absence of traditionally accessibility and reliability of public institutions definitively created for protection of common civic interest conducted to existing of institutions and state servant 'for' and 'to' themselves.

- *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 from the above-mentioned standpoint. Commonly the fervor of kinship relationships in former socialists' countries is at account of backward public sector and slight civic activity in it. The strength of kinship relationships is a direct consequence from undeveloped civic culture in a traditional society with high degree of personalization of the state institution.

Current Overview of Bulgarian NGOs. Size of the NGO Sector

At the end of 2000, Bulgaria had an adult population of 6.4 million and 4,500 registered NGOs, all of which have sprung up since 1989. A wide-ranging study conducted in 1999 indicates that 1,600 of these NGOs are active, and no less than 700 are in fact full-time organizations.

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

Most NGOs are set up with help from either US or EU-based donor organizations, and most of the major and influential NGOs continue to run primarily on 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 along 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, in all the different NGO fields, agendas of civil society and empowerment, as well as overcoming exclusion and discrimination.

The breakdown of data about the development of the NGO sector indicates that that the functionally operating organizations are between

350 and 500. We can characterize the current situation by a group of configurations:

- group of interests, which are publicly protected; they could be mediated by other corporate interests or are a subject of situational mobilization;
- institutional and technical base, which is established and developed at disproportionate levels;
- territorial representation, which is excessively uneven;
- initial forms of introducing practices for public relations in the activities of NGOs;
- an adequate level of intensity of the dialogue with international institutions in the sphere of the non-governmental sector;
- incomplete development of skills in fundraising and especially grant-making, in terms of skills for effective management of the finances in the sector;
- initial attempts in the sphere of non-profit marketing and social economy;
- a relatively well-developing centers of the type "think tanks" with a raising influence in consulting and implementation of civic initiatives.

The outlined situation of the non-governmental sector in Bulgaria calls for the intensification of transfer of experience, resources, knowledge and personnel in the sphere of civic initiative. The unbalanced development of the NGOs (in terms of territoriality and in regard to the priorities of their activity) brings to the necessity of establishing working mechanisms for overcoming the distance "center-periphery". This demand outlines the first sphere in which endeavors could be modeled, aimed at influencing the development processes of the NGOs.

In the early 1990s, were formed two ascendant types of NGOs. The first type encompasses those centers and institutes that are today

known as “think– tanks” or “research institutes.” The second type included all the remaining NGOs that covered the whole range of problems with which NGOs are typically concerned, from charities to professional guilds to environmental pressure groups. Bulgaria’s political system, the media sector, and the early business sector were formed together with this initial structuring of NGOs. In the early stages of the transitional period, connections between the activities of some shady 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 because of a series of economic crises and of governments that were openly hostile towards NGOs. Among these Socialist cabinet /1995–1997/ stood out as particularly hostile, infiltrating NGO circles with its own agents (which led to the blockage and the eventual break–up of the Union of Bulgarian Foundations) and appointing NGO “superintendents,” who were attached to the various Ministries, and whose responsibility it was to follow the organizations’ activities and report them to their Ministers and the government.

At the same time, the public consensus on the necessity of reforming society in Bulgaria also broke up. Both the successive governments and the public abandoned reform agendas from 1993 on. It was the NGO sector that filled the now empty reformist niche by acting as “keepers 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 the 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 also 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 an essential co–relation to the state, and indeed finds its primary relevance in a sort of antithetical relationship 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. 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 posthaste from local and national settings to the international level. The institutional transformations that are occurring in the context of globalization have seen international actors — such as United Nations agencies, regional organizations, finance and trade institutions and transnational corporations — as well as inter–governmental "summits" assume 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.



Certainly, political and economic changes that are underway have extended the importance of non–profit sector and brought it closer to

the attention of policy makers. It is an expanding tendency mainly in Western Europe that will spread among the Eastern European Countries who 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 involves a number of major challenges for the third sector. The governments are 'down-sizing', and are in a process of 'off-loading' some of their traditional tasks to private, non-profit institutions and commercial providers. In an era of budget-cutting, lean management, and privatization efforts, the voluntary sector is confronted with great challenges and opportunities.

There is a vast array of goods and services that are either quasi-public or quasi-private, and that is where most of the current disagreement about the meaning and culture of collective goods takes place. Importantly, new organizational forms emerge primarily in the contested terrain, that most of the growth of the non-profit sector has occurred. Referring to this it is important to disclose the attempts in a number of European countries to modernize association and corporate law to allow for greater flexibility in the legal forms not-for-profit organizations can take. In one way or another, they are all attempts to push the boundary of current policies and laws.

In order to relation between civil society and the state we have note that civil society groups can be much more effective in shaping state policy if the state has coherent powers for setting and enforcing policy. Good non-governmental advocacy work will actually tend to strengthen, not weaken state capacity.

February 26, 2003

IRIS

Sofia, Bulgaria

References

1. 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
2. “Bulgaria in NATO 2002”, IRIS, Sofia, 2002
3. Analytical Research Report “INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE NGO SECTOR: ORGANIZATIONS WITH SOCIO-ECONOMIC ORIENTATION” published by CID, 1999 Sofia
4. Petya Kabakchieva ‘Grazhdanskoto obshestvo sreshty darzhavata-balgarskata sityacia’ – ‘Civil society versus the state-Bulgarian situation’, Sofia, 2001
5. “Strategy Planning for the Bulgarian NGO Movement within Dem Net II Program, policy paper, IRIS, 1999
6. Nagle, John D. & Mahr, Alison (1999) *Democracy and democratisation: post-communist Europe in comparative perspective* (London: Sage). GUL Sov Stud OE100 1999-N
7. Blaga Taneva “Balgarskata Politicheska Kiltyra. Tradicii i savreennost”, published in Bulgarian , “Bulgarian Political Culture. The traditions and contemporarily. ”Sofia 2002

8. "Four Conceptions of the State" by Antonio Gramsci , published in www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/soc/courses/soc2r3/gramsci/gramindx.htm
9. the report of the World Bank "NGO World Bank Collaboration" published in www.worldbank.org
10. Erik C. Johnson "How think tanks improve public policy" , published 1996 in www.cipe.org
11. 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
12. "Selections from Political Writings (1910-1920)". With additional texts by Bordiga and Tasca. Selected and edited with an Introduction by Quintin Hoare. Translated by John Mathews. London & New York: Lawrence & Wishart; International Publishers, 1977. Pp. xxi-393. [Repr. U. of Minnesota Press, 1990].
13. the [Encyclopaedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict](#), San Diego: Academic Press
14. Lipset, S. M. (1996). *American Exceptionalism: A double-edged sword*, W.W. Norton, New York.
15. Lipsky, M., and Smith, S. R. Nonprofit organizations, government, and the welfare state. (1989-90)
16. Salamon, L. M. Nonprofit Organizations: America's Invisible Sector, *Issues of Democracy*, USIA Electronic Journal, 3(1), (1998). <http://www.usia.gov/journals/itdr/0198/ijde/salamon.htm>.
17. Salamon, L. M. *America's nonprofit sector: a primer*, The Foundation Center, New York. (1999).
18. Anheier, H. K., and Toepler, S. Commerce and the muse: Are art museums becoming commercial? In B. A. Weisbrod (ed), *To Profit or Not to Profit: The Commercial Transformation of the Nonprofit Sector*, Cambridge University Press, New York. (1998)
19. Behn, R. D., and Kant, P. A. Strategies for Avoiding the Pitfalls of Performance Contracting. *Public Productivity & Management Review*, 22(4), (1999)
20. Melendez, S. E. The Nonprofit Sector: The Cornerstone of Civil Society. *Issues of Democracy*, (1998).

21. Fosler, R. Scott. Working Together to Promote Civil Society,
(2000b)

http://www.independentsector.org/programs/leadership/three_sector_workingtogether.PDF

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