



Civil Society – A Media Briefing

EUROPEAN UNION PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPING CIVIL SOCIETY IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

The Cases of Hungary and Bulgaria

Summary: In Western Europe, civil society, the collection of voluntary associations situated between the state, the business world, and the family, evolved alongside democracy. In East Central Europe, fifty years of Soviet domination led to the absolute suppression of civil society. With the democratizing changes of the 1990s came the critical need to strengthen civil society in the region in order to entrench the democratic processes and preclude the possibility of a reversal to authoritarianism. Focusing on the contrasting cases of Hungary and Bulgaria, this brief outlines the actions undertaken by the European Union (EU) in order to overcome the weakness of post-communist civil society. Key EU actions include encouraging the development of non-governmental organizations, grass-roots movements, and a free press independent of state control.

The development of a civil society independent of government and economic interests was a crucial factor in the consolidation of Western European democracies in the early stages of their formation. Civil society played an important role in the separation of powers and the establishment of checks and balances in the political system in order to limit the misuse of power.

Whereas in Western Europe civil society evolved in conjunction with democracy, in Eastern Europe civil society was suppressed and could not play the role of an intermediary between citizens and the state. Communism, as practiced across East Central Europe, was predicated upon the involvement of the state in every aspect of life. The bureaucratic apparatus of the communist party was keen to oversee the political, economic, educational, cultural, and familial activities of the citizens. Naturally, this rendered the existence of any organizations independent of the state practically impossible.

The weakness of civil society is a lasting feature of the new democracies in East Central Europe even sixteen years after the collapse of the region's communist regimes. As one scholar has pointed out, "the mistrust of communist organizations, the persistence of friendship networks, and post-communist disappointment all have both substantive and statistical significance for explaining the low rate of citizen involvement in civil society."¹

The same scholar emphasizes that people's participation in organizations during communism was neither voluntary nor autonomous. Rather, it was "forced, coerced, or undertaken for instrumental and careerist purposes."² It is logical then to expect that the more people mistrusted the communist organizations in their country and the more coercive the regime was, the less likely they would be to participate in civil society even after the end of communism.

This brief outlines the actions undertaken by the European Union in order to overcome the weakness of post-communist civil society. The EU uses a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it demands that the applicant countries practice democratic decision-making, respect human rights, and allow freedom of association and expression. These are important prerequisites for accession to the EU. On the other hand, the EU offers grant-based aid to Eastern European organizations involved in the promotion of free press, minority rights, cross-cultural dialogue, and environmental protection, to name a few.

¹ Marc Morje Howard. *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

² *Ibid.*, p.105.

HUNGARY**Population:**³ 10,032,375**Member of the EU as of May 2004.**

Historical sketch: Hungary's historical legacy was conducive to the indigenous development of a civil society. As early as 1953, reform-minded communist prime minister Imre Nagy announced an ambitious program aiming for greater political and religious toleration, amnesty for political prisoners, and a more liberal attitude of the state toward the citizens. Such demands were highly disagreeable to the Soviet Union leadership, and the Red Army intervened to crush the 1956 Hungarian uprising led by Imre Nagy.

Despite the defeat of the uprising, the new Hungarian leaders were able to implement a more moderate policy domestically. In 1968, a liberalization of the markets and prices was introduced, followed by attempts to allow more personal freedom.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Hungary: NGOs began to function in Hungary as early as the mid-1980s. Their number increased dramatically after the collapse of communism, and by 1995, approximately 40,000 were registered.

Hungary's national NGOs cover a diverse range of activities: support for professional and educational associations, environmental protection, charitable work (Hungarian Heart Association), representation of groups such as women (Zonta Club), consumers (Civil Watch), retired persons, and entrepreneurs.⁴

Hungarian NGOs receive significant bottom-up funding from the so-called *1 percent allowance*: taxpayers designate 1 percent of their income tax to be paid to qualifying NGOs.⁵ NGOs established and funded by Western partners such as the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the PHARE networks (funded by the European Union) are also well-managed and organized.

Average number of organizational memberships per person:⁶ 0.82

³ Source of population data and maps: CIA. *World Factbook*, 2004.

⁴ Source: <<http://www.nonprofit.hu/english>>.

⁵ For more information: <www.onepercent.hu/>.

⁶ Source: *1995-1997 World Values Survey*.

BULGARIA**Population:** 7,517,973**EU candidate country expected to join in 2007.**

Historical sketch: In contrast to Hungary, the communist regime in Bulgaria strictly adhered to the centralized planning paradigm and never allowed market or social liberalization. The country was virtually sealed off from the West. Because political opposition in Bulgaria was weak, the communist party did not experience significant pressure to reform.

The repressive nature of the Bulgarian communist governments against any kind of dissent is illustrated by the case of Georgi Markov, a BBC World Service journalist and Bulgarian dissident. Markov died in London in 1978 after a poison injection from the tip of an umbrella. Allegedly, the operation was conducted by the Bulgarian secret services.

Non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria: Estimating the number of NGOs, charitable, and non-profit organizations in Bulgaria in the early years of transition is more difficult than in Hungary due to the lack of comprehensive studies of this sector. According to one report, in 1997 there were more than 150 NGOs in the capital, Sofia. Data for 2002 confirms the existence of 14,779 registered NGOs in the country.⁷

Bulgarian NGOs are active in fields such as human rights (Centre for Analyses and Strategies of Roma People), women's affairs (We), the environment (Inter Eco Club and Green Patrols), culture (Writers' Association), education, and business development.⁸ However, they are severely hampered by a lack of funds, a dearth of trained activists, and limited international networking. Because bottom-up funding is very limited, Bulgarian NGOs largely rely on international donors such as the EU both for financial support and expert training.

Average number of organizational memberships per person:⁹ 0.35

⁷ Source: *Nations in Transit Reports on Bulgaria*, 1998 and 2003. <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/nattransit.htm>>

⁸ Source: <<http://www.digsys.bg/ngo/>>.

⁹ Source: *1995-1997 World Values Survey*.

HUNGARY

Media: The period immediately after the collapse of communism was characterized by an intense struggle to control Hungary's media. The "media wars," as they often have been called, took place against the backdrop of a rapidly changing media sector. While Hungary's constitution guarantees freedom of the press, the exact parameters of this freedom have been the subject of ongoing court rulings and parliamentary acts since the early 1990s.

For example, in the beginning of the transition process, state-owned television stations held a monopoly on Hungarian-language programming. Today, privately owned channels have a greater viewership than the three state-owned stations.¹⁰

Currently, Hungarians receive their news overwhelmingly from foreign-owned private stations, attracting more than 80 percent of television viewers. Two hundred and twenty additional private stations have regional and city-specific reach.

The latest monitoring reports of Freedom House and the European Union give a positive evaluation of Hungarian freedom of the press.¹¹

Benefits for Hungarian civil society from EU aid programs: By virtue of participation in a number of European Union community programs such as the Fifth Framework Research Program, Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates, Youth, and Culture 2000, Hungarian non-governmental and non-profit organizations have been able to secure funding for student exchanges, educational and cultural projects, development of a free media, and research activities.¹²

Notably, a significant amount of EU funding has been channeled into promoting the social integration of the Roma population in Hungary. The PHARE program contribution to such projects amounted to 7 million euro in 2002.¹³

Recently, Hungary, together with the rest of the new East Central European members of the EU, has been included in the so-called "Watchdog Fund" set up by the EU explicitly in order to support civil society. This initiative is open to NGOs operating in the areas of the rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights, non-partisan nature of information, fight against corruption, and implementation of Community law in the new EU member states.¹⁴

¹⁰ Source: *Nations in Transit Reports on Hungary, 1998 and 2003*. <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/nattransit.htm>>.

¹¹ Source: *Nations in Transit Report on Hungary, 2003* and European Commission. *Comprehensive Monitoring Report on Hungary, 2003*.

¹² Source: European Commission. *Regular Report on Hungary's Progress towards Accession, 2002*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For more information see: <<http://www.ceetrust.org/news/93.html>>.

BULGARIA

Media: In general, the Bulgarian constitution provides for freedom of the press. There are no legal penalties for "irresponsible" journalism. However, the penal code criminalizes libel, defamation, and slander. On these grounds, in 1997, a journalist served a six-month sentence for "libeling" a prosecutor by accusing him of corruption.¹⁵

Currently, all print media in Bulgaria are privately owned. With the exception of party-run newspapers and publications that defend the economic interests of their owners, newspapers in Bulgaria are mainly independent. Overall, there are 247 newspapers and magazines, including 10 large weekly magazines, 26 monthly magazines, and 53 large regional dailies.

As for television, there are 63 stations in the country, 10 of which reach national audiences. Only 1 of these is state-owned; the rest are regional cable networks.

The freedom of the press in Bulgaria is comparable to that in Hungary. There were some reported violations in the early years of transition, but their number has declined over time. The latest monitoring reports of Freedom House and the European Union positively evaluate the freedom of the Bulgarian press.¹⁶

Benefits for Bulgarian civil society from EU aid programs: Bulgarian NGOs and non-profit organizations have received funding from the European Union to support projects in developing civil protection mechanisms, entrepreneurship, student mobility, environmental protection, and research activities.

Like in Hungary, these funds have come from EU community programs such as Civil Protection Mechanism, Culture 2000, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship, Leonardo da Vinci II, Media Plus, Socrates II, and Youth.¹⁷

In addition, the 2003 PHARE program secured 9 million euro especially for strengthening the freedom of the media in Bulgaria, promoting Roma health and education, and child well-being in general.¹⁸

As an EU applicant, Bulgaria has less access to EU funding compared to Hungary, which is already a member of the EU. Yet the civil society grants provided by the EU for Bulgarian NGOs are of vital importance, given the limited availability of domestic funding.

¹⁵ Source: *Nations in Transit Report on Bulgaria, 1998*.

¹⁶ Source: *Nations in Transit Report on Bulgaria, 2003* and European Commission. *Regular Report on Bulgaria, 2004*.

¹⁷ Source: European Commission. *Regular Report on Bulgaria's Progress towards Accession, 2003*.

¹⁸ For more information see: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/pdf/brochure_roma_oct2003_en.pdf>.

Conclusion: Since the early 1990s, civil society has become a key focus of the EU pre-accession aid for the East European applicant countries, because the existence of such a sector independent of government control is essential for the functioning of the checks and balances in liberal democracies.

As a consequence, the number of non-governmental organizations in East Central Europe has grown exponentially with the opening of opportunities to participate in EU-funded projects in areas such as promoting human rights, encouraging the integration of ethnic minorities, establishing cultural dialogue among the people in Europe, and strengthening the freedom of the media.¹⁹

In sum, the comparisons drawn between Hungary and Bulgaria so far suggest that in Hungary, the growth of civil society was indigenously-driven and only boosted by external actors such as the EU.

In Bulgaria, the role of external promoters of civil society such as the EU was crucial. They have intervened in order to provide critical incentives for the formation and development of a vibrant civil society independent of state influence.

Over time, as the NGO sectors mushroomed across East Central Europe, providers of civil society aid such as the EU began to confront a number of issues, and to accumulate a set of lessons. These are now held out as "best practices" for aid donors.²⁰

Aid providers for civil society building are urged to:

- go beyond giving aid to the same circle of familiar faces in the capital cities and to disseminate aid to smaller groups in towns and rural areas;
- help establish mechanisms and incentives inducing the well-established NGOs (which donors initially favored) to provide training to the less well-established groups;
- help NGOs diversify their donor support, develop local sources of funding, and build local habits of corporate philanthropy;
- explore the *percent allowance* option, through which taxpayers designate a given percentage (usually 1-3 percent) of their income tax to be paid to NGOs of their choice.

By taking these measures, aid donors will ensure that the beneficial effects of short-term aid will make a lasting contribution to building a self-sustainable civil society in the recipient countries.

¹⁹ For more information see: **Culture 2000 Programme** <<http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/129006.htm>>. **European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights** <<http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/r10110.htm>>.

²⁰ Source: Thomas Carothers. "Western Civil-Society Aid to Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union." *East European Constitutional Review* 8, no.3 (1999).