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## Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe

Findings of the 25 Years After – Mapping  
Civil Society in the Visegrád Countries  
Project

by Christian Schreier

### I. The Research Project

In 2014 Maecenata conducted a research project about the state of civil society in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic 25 years after the fundamental changes of 1989. The major aims of this project were to outline both, the development and the current status of civil society in this region called the *Visegrád Four (V4)*.

In cooperation with research partners in the four countries, Maecenata designed a guide of specific research questions and topics to be addressed in the study to keep the single country reports comparable. The project was divided into two main parts:

a.) *the examination of state of research and resources*: This first stage of the project looked at where and what kind of research on the countries' civil societies has been conducted so far, by whom and what desiderata remain. Relevant publications on civil society in the respective countries were examined and an overview of existing databases and other data sources was compiled as well as of active centers of research, training, and policy studies. Instead of merely providing a list, we looked at how they can be evaluated in terms of scope, accurateness and depth. Finally, we considered

the most crucial gaps in research and funding in the respective countries. This collection of data should provide a basis for further research on civil society in the region. For researchers, interested in existing data sources, often hard to overcome language barriers can thus be easily circumvented. Also we have had a look on the development and the state of research infrastructure on civil society in these countries. The findings are published as issue 74 in the OPUSCULA SERIES which is freely available at: [www.opuscula.maecenata.eu](http://www.opuscula.maecenata.eu).

The best data on civil society is available for Poland and Hungary. Hungary has a long tradition in collecting data about NPOs. Since 1993, the Hungarian central statistical office annually collects data from all NPOs and publishes an overview and a comprehensive analysis based on the findings. In addition, for more than 20 years, the Non-Profit Research Centre in Budapest has been an important player in Hungarian civil society research and international exchange. But the low level of cooperation between public and private institutions in Hungary does not encourage the development of networks and improvements in the field.

In Poland, the Central Statistical Office and the National Court Registry are the most important providers of statistical data on civil society. Since 2011, public institutions collect and provide data not only about third sector organisations but also about volunteering. Private organisations, namely the Klon/Jawor Association, are active in research as well. Whereas public institutions mainly focus on economic factors, these private research centres also address qualitative issues.



Meanwhile, the Czech Republic have good quality data about civil society. Above all, the Czech Statistical Office has been implementing the Satellite Account of Nonprofit Institutions as prescribed in the Handbook on Non-profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts by the UN Statistical Division. The Czech Government annually publishes a survey of all funding for non-profit organisations from public sources (from the national, regional and local levels of government).

Research, in academic institutions and by the civil society sector itself, is still not much advanced, but it has gradually been improving, especially since the establishment of the Department of civil society Studies at Charles University in Prague in 2002 and the Centre for Non-profit Sector Research at Masaryk University in Brno in 2003.

In Slovakia, research on civil society is also underdeveloped and insufficient. Basic information about the institutional, economic and social characteristics of Civil society organisations is often missing. The scant existing data only provides basic information about NGOs derived from registration documents. In comparison to other countries, the existing data lacks sufficient quantitative and qualitative depth.

*b.) Assessing breadth and depth of civil society:* The second part of the project resulted in the book publication: *25 Years After. Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrád Countries* (Stuttgart, 2015). It is the most comprehensive part of the project and focuses on qualitative research in contrast to the first study, which is very fact-oriented and data-heavy.

The aim of this part was to capture the circumstances in the respective countries from different angles. Therefor the research associates from the four countries prepared country reports, all structured in the following way:

- basic information about the country's Civil society and its development over the last two decades,
- the environment of civil society,
- fields of activity approach,
- functional approach,
- claims approach,
- organizational approach,

- conclusions and of course
- the sources used.

The research associates were free to add their own aspects, to meet the demands of an adequate depiction of the idiosyncratic context and conditions in the individual countries. Additionally a comparative chapter looks at the similarities and differences as well as on the region as a whole.

## II. Main Findings

After the breakdown of the socialist regimes in the Visegrád countries, a boom of CSOs and initiatives took place, which is a commonplace phenomenon after the breakdown of authoritarian regimes. Many existing structures that could not appear in public and were kept underground came to light after the collapse of the authoritarian regimes. People began to join associations and use the new possibilities of participation in social processes.

The V4's civil society is still in transition. In Poland and Slovakia the number of CSOs as well as their economic potential has risen constantly since the early nineties. Legal regulation influenced the growth of civil society. But while the number of CSOs and the number of full-time employees in this sector has increased, membership in CSOs is decreasing. This development shows a transition towards independence with an ongoing professionalization of the sector.

Grasping the role of CSOs and their relationship to the respective states and administrative authorities demands a certain understanding of politics. In the Czech Republic, for example, a public discourse about the role of CSOs had led to two completely different concepts. The first saw civil society as an exclusively private sphere of voluntary action, which had to be as independent as possible from government influences. The other concept saw the welfare state as a universal tool to encounter all social problems and in this logic CSOs are not important for the state. Even if the latter concept was finally not the operative approach used in the V4, it affected the status quo nonetheless. The battle between the two approaches led to a

compromise in many areas of civil society policy. Compared to the situation during the Soviet Republic, the new governments' attitude towards CSOs was largely affirmative after 1989.

In the case of Hungary, initially a bottom-up approach has been touted to be the best strategy. However, the present system is characterised by a top-down approach. In addition, the party and government influence on civil society has highly increased. By losing the label of independence, distrust towards CSOs rose, and membership and civic engagement declined. In Slovakia, the importance of close cooperation between the state and civil society is widely acknowledged, at least officially. However, the partnership is more formal than real. CSOs are not in fact perceived as relevant actors in the political process. The attitude towards civil society is respectful but only selectively supportive. Likewise, a lack of partnership between CSOs and the state representatives on all levels needs to be lamented in Poland. Additionally, the multitude of formal requirements and legal regulations are obstacles for smaller organisations. Nevertheless, local governments have been the most important partners for CSOs in Poland for many years. Hence, it is not surprising that despite the freedom of expression criticism of political authorities is very limited. The relationship between civil society and relevant state institutions can be expanded in all countries. CSOs are only partially recognized as sovereign partners in solving social problems. States are still trying to abuse CSOs to provide cheaper services instead of letting them participate in significant decision-making processes.

The connection between civil society and the market is currently of great concern. The European financial crisis pushes important goals and concerns of civil society out of focus. About half of the CSOs do not even see companies as potential partners or sources of funding anyway. This is the case despite the still weak funding base for CSOs in the V4 countries. Only the case study on Poland reported an increase of the number of CSOs networking with the private sector, and this not only to receive funds. At the same time, financial stability and human resources are lacking, but urgently needed in order to overcome the hurdles of international

funding applications procedures. In Slovakia, the ongoing underfunding of CSOs has also had a massive impact on their institutional development and capacity.

Still the largest share of funding comes from local, regional or central governments. But for example in the Czech Republic, the biggest part of the public funding goes to the old and established organisations and not to the new changemakers or grassroots organisations. The amount and importance of international funding reached a climax in the mid-90s. US and EU institutions introduced big subsidies to stabilize the young democratic regimes. They thereby influenced the behavior of the fund-seeking CSOs as they did not concentrate in the first place on the needs and goals they recognised but on the objectives they hoped would help to receive a share of the international public funds. In the case of Poland, this led to a so called NGO-isation of civil society. No longer had the problem perception of citizens determined the alignment of CSOs but a growing job orientation. Merely a high number of CSOs does not guarantee a strong civil society. It would be easy to say that this could not work out in the long run, especially when international subsidies are reduced.

As mentioned before, path-dependencies are resonating to this day in every country. One problematic legacy of Communism is the widespread distrust in all kinds of institutions. Only the study of the Czech Republic mentioned a rise of trust since 2011. The other three reports state a rising distrust towards political institutions that led to distrust in organized civil society (Hungary), a general lack of social trust (Poland) and a reserved attitude of the public towards the third sector (Slovakia) respectively.

The OECD Economic Outlook Panel achieved different results, but in principle, they show the same tendency. A 2012 survey from the OECD shows a massive increase in trust in Poland and Slovakia, whereas in the Czech Republic and Hungary numbers decreased. In Hungary (23%) and the Czech Republic (18%), trust in the national government has the lowest rates of the V4 countries. In Poland, the confi-

dence rate grew by 9% and in the Slovak Republic it grew by about 25% between 2007 and 2012.

On the other hand, trust in consumer associations is very high in the Czech Republic (78%), but rather low in Slovakia (41%), Poland (54%) and Hungary (55%) compared to the average of 65%.

Even more impressive are the results concerning trust in people. All over central and Eastern Europe the claim "Most people can be trusted" is agreed to by only approx. 20% of the citizens whereas in Western countries the approval ranges from 30% to 65%. This indicates an urgent need for developing a healthy and vibrant civil society. A prime aim must therefore be to improve the conditions for trust in all countries, both in institutions and in people's fellow citizens.

An analysis of the situation in Poland showed that civic engagement is inhibited by the lack of trust in institutions and a high corruption rate. The interpersonal trust, e.g. in family members, friends and colleagues, is all the greater. However, this citizens' identification is complicated by society as a whole. A retreat into the private sphere is the result.

The relatively low trust among citizens is common in societies in political transition. This is explained by the general change of society's values as well as through the dissolving concepts of social cohesion and solidarity. These are necessary requirements, which you cannot simply buy with money.

The development of civil society in the V4 countries was quite diverse. Depending on several factors, civil society had to overcome several hurdles before noticeable effects could be felt. The political concepts of changing governments and the strategies of international support programs as well as the individual social circumstances were no easy preconditions for the development of an efficient and vibrant civil society in a democratic system. But despite these obstacles, civil society played an important role in the development of the V4 region. In Hungary – which has been no simple patch for CSOs recently – a vivid and transparent but

not yet fully active civil society has arisen and the influence of the nonprofit sector has risen.

The report about civil society in the Czech Republic reveals a lack of basics such as a good infrastructure, conceptual and strategic advocacy, evaluation and self-regulation as well as accountability and better transparency. Beyond that, civil society has to find its role within the European context.

Last but not least civil society in Slovakia has grown in numbers and diversity and social capital has also expanded. When researching the situation in Slovakia, however, the missing available data about civil society makes an accurate analysis nearly impossible. This is a major challenge in a lot of countries. In contrast, the Polish civil society is quite well researched. The third sector seems to be stabilized in general but not rooted in its social context. That is why social problems of the past need to be addressed. The precondition for this would be greater financial independence of CSOs and a decline of historically strong family ties.

There is a great number of interconnected difficulties and challenges for civil society featuring in all of the country reports: the weak sectorial identity, shortcomings in the professional management of CSOs, the inconsistent regulation of the third sector or problems of transparency, to name just a few. In combination, they result in limited opportunities for social participation in political and economic decisions. But it must also be pointed out that these problems exist more or less in all the other EU countries as well. This does not improve the individual situation but given that the V4 countries have to deal with the same problems as other European countries the impression gained is that the impact of the old regimes is no longer in the foreground.

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