Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe: Lessons from the 'Dark Side'

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Introduction

Can mankind

Lessons from the dark side of communism in post-communist Europe

Civil society in post-communist Europe
Upon receipt of a second copy of the code, the technical editor and production team will ensure that all aspects of the book are free from errors and omissions. The editor will also provide feedback on the overall structure and content of the book to ensure that it meets the objectives outlined in the outline and proposal. The production team will then work closely with the editor to create a comprehensive manuscript that will be submitted for final review. Throughout the process, the technical editor will communicate with the production team to address any issues that arise and to ensure that the book is delivered on time and to the highest possible standard.
The role of the community association in the provision of public good services

The complex situation of (your society)

The role of the community association in the provision of public good services
Third, there has been a certain level of organisational continuity within civil society. Some of the groups that already existed under the communists have played an important role within post-communist civil society, either revamped or not. In the chapters this is most notably shown in the cases of Matica Slovenská, which constituted the core of SNM (see Malová), and the Ukrainian miners (see Mykhnenko). Other examples in Eastern Europe include many trade unions, environmental groups, and organisations of ethnic minorities and women. They had a comparative advantage over new CSOs in the early 1990s, due to their experience and their financial and organisational resources. Interestingly, organisational continuity was weak among youth organisations (Ekiert and Kubik 1999), possibly because of their particularly strong link with the communist regime. This factor may very well explain the success of alternative youth subcultures like the skinheads, who filled the void left by the demise of the massive communist youth structure (see Kúrti (this volume)).

Finally, as emphasised by Malová, Slovakia shows the legacy of small, local protests, dating back to the pre-communist period of state and nation-building. This is important to note, because it may shed light on the underlying nature of civil society in Eastern Europe; i.e. not that it is necessarily non-existent, but that it is largely local and small-scale. This situation also partly stems from the legacy of communist regimes, where friendship and neighbourhood networks represented more meaningful forms of association than the politicised and controlled mass organisations. In various countries, national (mass) mobilisation is therefore reserved for times of crisis, opposition to the regime or, as in Croatia and Slovakia, critical elections. More ‘day-to-day’ affairs, particularly involving socio-economic and cultural demands, are dealt with at the local or regional level. This could also be seen in the case of the Ukrainian miners, whose great variety of contentious actions remained by and large limited to the Donbas area (see Chapter 6).

**Ideological legacies**

The antithetical relationship between civil society and the state, central in the conception of Antonio Gramsci and so dominant in the writings of key East European dissidents (e.g. Havel, Konrád) is still very influential in both the writing on, and the beliefs of activists within civil society in post-communist Europe. In that, many contemporary CSOs do exactly the same as their historic predecessors: they distrust and oppose the state in general, and (party) political elites in particular. Some problematic consequences of this legacy for the development of civil society are addressed clearly and convincingly in Dvořák’s chapter. However, the anti-statistm also puts several CSOs, which might otherwise be interpreted in a different way (i.e. ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’), in the same basket. For example, why are anti-elite and anti-statist positions of groups like ‘Impulse 99’ and ‘Thank You, Time To Go’ largely considered positive for democratisation, while very similar positions of groups like Samoobrana are deemed to be detrimental to it?

Another ideological legacy of the communist period, which has both ideological and behavioural effects, is that of militarism. Although communist regimes officially preached world peace, and heavily supported the peace movement in the West, their own societies were instilled with a militaristic outlook. This was particularly the case with young people, who were socialised in strict hierarchical, almost paramilitary, organisations like the Pioneers and the various national, Komsomol-like youth groups. As László Kúrti has argued, this has created a fertile breeding ground for the skinheads in Hungary, whose martialistic bonding rituals perfectly fit the value structures of the post-communist youth (that were socialised during communism). Similar observations have been made for other East European countries. For example, Hans Brinks has argued that for some young people it had turned out to be only a short step from a Wehrsporthilfe to a paramilitary Wehrsporthilfegruppe in post-communist East Germany (2000: 49). 6

The cyclical nature of civil society mobilisation

Most literature on civil society focuses purely on longevity and stability, i.e. the number of NGOs or of their membership. As discussed by Kopcewicz, this might lead us to see both more and less civil society than there actually is. Most NGOs in post-communist Europe are cadre organisations with no grass-roots support whatsoever. Their members are generally full-time employees, for whom their work is a job rather than a calling. In sharp contrast, many of the ‘uncivil’ movements do represent and involve parts of society, though in a more fluid and ad hoc manner. However, this is not much different from the way in which ‘civil society’ mobilised in 1989 against the communist regimes; it is possibly also not much different from mobilisation strategies of CSOs in contemporary Western Europe.

With the notable exception of Poland, most mass demonstrations in communist Eastern Europe were at best loosely organised, involving few if any CSOs. Indeed, often the key organisation involved was the youth organisation of the communist party (see Chapter 8). Also, the ‘cycle of contention’ was generally rather short (with the obvious exception of Poland), spanning between less than a week to a few months (cf. Merkel 2001). As John Nagle and Alison Mahr have argued: ‘The largest demonstrations in the autumn of 1989 were grand symbolism, but the anti-communist liberation movements were gone within a year or two, leaving little organizational legacy’ (1999: 216). In short, the civil society that so heroically ‘defeated’ communism, and was deservedly praised by most
scholars in the field, was not much different from the civil society today, which is so often criticised for being weak or even absent.

As Dryzek perceptively noted, the mobilisation of 'civil society' against the state was followed by the inclusion of civil society into the state. As a consequence, he stated, civil society was left severely weakened. Though partly true, this provides a too limited, homogeneous view of civil society. Not the whole civil society was left weakened by the incorporation of some of its former leading members, but only a section. Indeed, the one section that most scholars focus on exclusively is the 'pro-democratic' one. But while that section was left weakened by its leaders' inclusion in the state, other sections used the vacant space to (again) start mobilising (cf. Szabó 1995). A good example is SNM, which organised and mobilised in much the same way as the anti-communist groups and individuals had done (see Chapter 4). In a similar vein, after (and because of) the incorporation of SNM into the Slovak state, particularly under the third Mečiar government (1994-8), a new 'pro-democratic' civil society started mobilising, which in 1998 led to the successful pro-vote campaign and the subsequent victory of the opposition parties (see Bútorová et al. 1999).

Ekiert and Kubik have argued that 'within the relatively open political space created by the old regime's collapse, popular protest should contribute to the process of defining the public domain and remaking the boundaries between state and society' (1999: 11). This painstaking process can be clearly observed in the actions of, most notably, SNM and the Croatian war veterans. In both cases the state initially absorbed (civil) society, i.e. when sympathetic governments were ruling (HZDS-SNS and HDZ respectively). After the fall of these governments, the relationship between the state and the movements was redrawn, which again led to contentious politics, and probably again to renegotiations – after all, democracy is an ongoing process.

This is not to say that history is a struggle of 'civil society' against 'uncivil society', with periodic alternations of power. Civil society is not one homogeneous entity, but rather a heterogeneous sphere in which various groups exist and at times mobilise; sometimes together, sometimes apart, sometimes together against the state, sometimes alone against each other. In general, successful mobilisation of one group/network is followed by its demobilisation (and possibly the inclusion of its leaders into the state). This does not mean the disappearance of civil society as a whole, but the (often temporary) demobilisation of a section of civil society. Various other sections of civil society will remain hardly touched by these events, or, in some cases, will actually become activated by it.

Finally, it should be stressed that the implosion of the 'pro-democratic' civil society organisations after 1989 (or after 1998 in Slovakia and 1999 in Croatia for that matter) has to do less with the periodic alternations of power than with the character of mobilisation of many CSOs in Eastern Europe. I have noted earlier the strong anti-statist orientation of many groups. However, equally important is their reactive rather than proactive character (cf. Tilly 1978). The basic form of contentious politics was resistance rather than protest (cf. Ekiert and Kubik 1999). Incidentally, this applies also to many of the movements studied in this book, including both the 'uncivil' (e.g. the Ukrainian miners, SPOT, and Samoobrona) and the 'civil' (e.g. 'Impulse 99' and 'Thank You, Time To Go'). In contrast, SNM and the skinhead movement are examples of protest, i.e. proactive mobilisation.

Conclusion

As expressed in the Preface, this book is as much a study of the 'dark side' of civil society in post-communist Europe, as it is a challenge to the bulk of recent literature on civil society (in the region in particular). In the words of Neera Chandhoke, 'what is being suggested here is that our normative expectations about the sphere of civil society should not derive our analysis of actually existing civil societies' (2001: 5). We believe that the chapters in the book have proven the need to readjust the conceptual understanding and the empirical study of civil society in general, and in post-communist Europe in particular. I suggest that this should include (at least) these four points.

First, the concept of civil society – roughly defined as organised collective activities that are not part of the household, the market (or more general economic production), and the state – should be seen as a heuristic device (cf. Chandhoke 2001). In practice, groups of civil society will at times overlap with all other 'spheres'. Moreover, civil society is itself hugely diverse and heterogeneous, including a plethora of different and sometimes opposing agents. Hence, it is not useful as a unitary concept in empirical research; i.e. statements like 'an active civil society is good for democracy' are invalid, as it depends on which groups within civil society dominate.

Second, the separation between 'civil society' and 'uncivil society' makes sense only in a normative framework, and then exclusively with uncivil society defined as a sub-set of civil society. In empirical research, particularly of a comparative nature, the distinction obscures more than it highlights. As various chapters have showed, CSOs are often difficult to classify as 'civil' or 'uncivil', as their goals and actions are highly influenced by their environment. They perform multiple tasks, and they sometimes change character.

Third, there is no straightforward relation between the ideology of CSOs and their effect on democracy – i.e. 'civil' movements are not by definition good for democracy/democratisation, and 'uncivil' movements are not by definition bad for democracy/democratisation. Again, this depends to a large extent on the interaction between CSOs and their environment, including both the 'state' and other CSOs.