

About the Civil Society Forum - what we heard and what we think

Conclusions and reflections from the CEE Trust

Two opposing assessments permeate all discussions about civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. The first one sees thriving civil societies around, represented by myriads of organizations and movements that fulfill diverse and important social functions. The second one holds that there is no civil society to speak of; it is weak; it has lost its soul, its energy, its leading position and has turned into a 'bunch of NGOs'.

We believe that the rationales behind these perceptions grow out of the fundamental change in the understanding of the relationship of civil society to "good" society that has happened over the last 20 years. There is prevalent, commonsensical and, basically, correct intuition that civil society exists to correct the failures of the state to deliver the public good and to protect this good against the predatory attacks of business. **What has become obsolete however is the idea that there is an self-evident and undisputable public good, defended by the civil society.**

This vision feeds assumptions with wide currency such as the one that perceives civil society as some sort of vigilante, ready to stand up and address any infringement of the public good, while we, average citizens, watch... Another one implies that if one is working for common benefit (and these are, in first place, the non-profit organizations), s/he does not have to convince the public in its obvious usefulness. Leaning too heavily on such empty concepts undermines the most precious asset, the trust in civil society organization.

Back in the 1990ies, the public agenda - social and economic - was essentially a matter of consensus in post-communist European countries: liberal democracy (free elections, human rights, rule of law) and market economy. Citizens, reformist political parties, foreign donors and international institutions shared this understanding and focused their efforts to make it happen. Local energies and activists received generous support in terms of money and pre-packaged solutions: norms, practices, institutions, experts and consultants, intended to speed up the process of transition. The change happened in an amazingly short term. The non-profit non-governmental organizations were among the main drivers of change in this period of shaken order, delivering in the fields of rule of law, protection of human rights, restoration of community activism, reform of public policies, revival of the drive for philanthropy, etc. etc. The Trust for Civil Society was created at the end of this period precisely with the intention to help preserve this wonderful asset.

In 2010 it is quite clear that the consensus what is good for our societies and how to bring it about, belongs to the past. Few are those who challenge seriously the democratic principles and institutions as social framework but the political agenda - the policy to translate it into livable environment - has become 'normal', that is - a contested field. Moreover, the first decade of the 21st century signaled visible change in the political systems: the weakening and blurring of big ideologies (liberalism, socialism, conservatism), which used to offer the whole package (ideology cum policy). What some call the consumer-driven political behavior (if I am not happy with my political party I do not press it to change, I change my political allegiance) is taking over the old party loyalties. The growing appeal of opportunistic, public-opinion driven, charismatic, i.e. populist leaders is the visible manifestation of this trend.

We believe that civil society is self organized engagement for something larger than yourself and your direct family. But there is no common denominator. Today we have to face reality: the public good is different things to different people, groups, strata, even nations. Civil society is mobilizations around different, sometimes conflicting agendas: human rights watchdogs are certainly working and fighting for the public good but so are the association of farmers, who believe that the wealth of the nations depends on their survival and prosperity. Euroenthusiasts believe that unified Europe is the best prospect for bright future but Euroskeptics, patriotic, nationalist or, often - alas - openly xenophobic groups preach that the nation is the natural condition for good life. Activists attack shelters to free mistreated animals but they meet there concerned mothers-against-vicious stray dogs. Volunteers deliver food to the poor and the homeless but libertarian groups insist that if the state is appropriating 45% of the national revenues it should put in place a system to provide for the weak.

The public good is becoming contested arena and civil society is the broad term to describe these different agendas. This is not a level playing field, however, quite the opposite: powerful interests from different quarters outside of the civil society create substantial inequalities in terms of material, social, and symbolic capital: money, constituencies, and appeal. They invest a lot for or against a certain agenda and the complaint "there is no civil society" or "civil society is weak" is often our frustration that the issues we believe important do not have a strong voice or organizational framework to promote it.

With the framework of liberal democracy in place, the decision how our societies could be **good societies for all has gradually become a matter of deliberation and competition about policies**. Therefore, we agree with many activists who believe that civil society organizations should become political. That does not imply, of course, to become partisan or to align with political parties for good. Being political means having position, stand for it and use different tools to make it real: it could mean push for change but, also, fight for preservation. The most direct path is to go straight to the decision-making bodies (local, regional, national, European) and it may happen in coalition or confrontation with political parties. But not in misplaced neutrality. The civil society has the formidable potential to mobilize its own constituencies outside of the established political ecosystem. This act, let's face it, is no less political.

Another phenomenon we witness in many CEE countries and beyond is the unpleasant connotation, related to the term NGO. It translates the vague feeling that something fake was substitutes for something real. This is a very damaging misconception. Non-governmental organizations (or non-profit organizations as is their official legal name in many countries), are one of the basic forms of existence of civil society, crucial for any attempt to bring change. The criticism is deserved, to some extent. **The sprouting of hundreds of organizations which recycle projects with nice rhetoric and negligible social effect has eroded the public trust**. However, most critics of the NGOs do work with or for non-profit organizations from time to time. To borrow from Henry Kissinger, when someone needs to call the civil society, s/he dials the phone number of an "NGO".

This reading of the social and political field entails, in our opinion, a few clear challenges for the active self-organized citizens, registered or not. We have tried to distill a couple of them out of the dozens of opinions, ideas, critiques and suggestions that we read and heard during the Civil Society Forum, and, as a matter of fact, in the course of our daily work.

Nothing is more important for the civil society entities of any persuasion and shape than a clear cause. **If an organization, network or movement cannot state in one sentence what they stand for, there is something inherently wrong.** Many organizations have developed carefully worded mission statements, areas of engagement and descriptions of what they do without an answer what do they exist for.

It is time to stop overestimating the effect of rational arguments and underestimating emotions. Civil society organizations are made of people, work for people and need support from people. Rational arguments might convince but will not motivate (enough). If organizations and movements want and need real supporters, followers, or communities, they should remind themselves that people are driven by emotions: love, compassion, joy, belonging, sense of personal fulfillment or by frustration, pity, anger, and, unfortunately greed and envy. Many good organizations have forgotten this simple truth and worry that people and media are not interested in their message(s). Understanding and endorsing is one thing; committing for the long haul - quite different. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a strong argument to use in advocacy efforts; but if you wish to win the competition for the hearts and purses of the citizens on the social battlefield of ideas - you need more.

Any cause needs support - people (numbers are political, said Bob Geldof), endorsement by institutions, expertise, money. **These days, one needs to work much harder for this support.** When money was coming from international donors, it was easy because organizations were knocking on open doors. All they needed was an intelligently written request and a few good people. This situation is changing albeit slowly. There is enough money coming from the governments and the donors to allow hundreds of organizations to do their needed work. The project culture is here to stay because this is the way institutions work. The stratum of professional, non-profit, non-governmental intermediaries will grow and evolve as a third sector with well-defined social functions along the lines of the widely spread European model of corporate representation and contractual relationships. Some claim that this is the future of civil society in Europe.

We beg to differ: there is more to civil society than representation of organized interests. The motivation to contribute to the betterment of human condition beyond the interest of the group will remain, in our understanding, the hallmark of those who claim to belong to the civil society. It might go against the grain of popular opinion, established policy or national consensus. For those who stand for this 'minority' agenda, our message is **be brave**; there are supporters out there.

The time has come for organized citizens with a cause to go out and gather other types of support, outside of the public treasury: from businesses - not because the group or organization is good per se but because together we can achieve more than we can do in isolation - both for our cause and for your business and; as value added – it will make you feel good.

- from the growing middle class - it has achieved a certain living standard and it is time to start "helping the bourgeois become citizens" as one Forum participant put it.
- from people, door to door, office to office, convincing them that if they support a cause they can turn their outrage or longing into something effective. The 1% legislation is a fantastic opportunity in CEE that other regions could only dream of.

Lastly, **be sharp**. It is definitely time to let go the idea that we can train media, civil servants and the public to understand the value added by civil society – we just have to deliver. Citizens do not think in objectives, target groups, achievables, and indicators of success. However the public will still judge whether you are managing to really make that difference you are talking about. This is especially true at the crucial moment when a good report, research, consultation, petition, policy, strategy, pilot model, website should move and produce waves into real society. The etymology of the word ‘project’ is a vision in your head of something not existing yet – a good initiative has from the beginning a clear and convincing idea what it is about and how to arrive at it. To convince citizens to donate time and donors to lend support there is a need of clear thinking and tactics.

To sum it up we believe that civil society is not an army of like-minded people, nor an utopian group of altruistic individuals who generously share their time and money to push forward the brave new world of good society. It is a contested field where different visions of the good society clash every day. Civil society organizations - from social networks to think-tanks to soup kitchens - are the vehicles of these efforts.

This set of assumptions has very real implications for the work of the CEE Trust. Since the first day of planning of the Civil Society Forum we have openly declared that we regard this initiative as an opportunity to check our working assumptions and approaches, to listen to what our partners and grantees have to say about the present and the future: a sort of a big and long focus group. The result of this consultation is a proposal by the staff, and a decision of the Board, to spend our last three years of existence and the remaining 25 million USD of our assets, in a more focused way.

First, the structured and widely advertized calls for proposals, addressing the needs of the civil society, have outgrown their utility. We see an opportunistic tendency to recycle old and safe approaches and proposed solutions, without consideration for the wide context. The forceful entrance of the EU as donor, supporting civil society, reinforces the trend. The instrumentalization of organizations and standartization of activities motivated the CEE Trust to look in the opposite direction. We will welcome inquiries year round but will look for bold ideas, brave positions and strong organizations. We will look more carefully at initiatives and organizations which work for important issue but cannot rely on governmental or business support or mobilize large constituencies.

Second, we will not indicate thematic areas with higher priority in the selection of proposals to support. In 2010 we will be even more concerned not about social needs but about the existence of actors, able to address these needs: our priority will be clear cause, clear idea how to achieve it, clear and public position, clear understanding of who’s behind and beside you; clear outreach to the citizens.

Third, we will give preference to organizations, which demonstrate willingness and plans how to find support, including financial contributions, in a different way than drafting the regular project proposal. The best will survive the transition that seems to be happening - from private grants to institutional or real citizens’ support. In that process the CEE Trust will invest its last funds into organizations that clearly are maturing into organizations that will aspire and continue playing a role in the development of CEE societies.