

Civil society in Central and Eastern Europe: what's left of it?



European Alternatives is an independent civil society organisation devoted to exploring and promoting transnational politics and culture by means of campaigns, conferences, publications, artistic projects and the annual TRANSEUROPA festival.

We believe that democratic participation, social equality and cultural innovation are undermined by the political form of the nation-state, and that progress in each of these areas will be achieved through the fostering of transnational forms of collectivity.

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Preface

Alessandro Valera, European Alternatives



European Alternatives (EA) presents itself as a civil society organisation working for democracy, equality and culture beyond the nation-state. With an office in Romania and some of its most vibrant members and collaborators based in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), EA has tried for a few years to bridge the huge historical differences among the people who used to live in the two sides of the iron curtain by focusing on the commonalities of the problems European citizens are facing across the continent in the 21st century. Despite EA's effort to unite Europeans in common struggles, it has never been our intention to hide real differences, especially when they stretch back to historical roots. EA's focus on action by European civil society as a way to bridge the gap between EU institutions characterized by democratic deficits and citizens who feel they have no more power to determine their present and future has not always resonated well with Central and Eastern European citizens. The mere talk of civil society has often caused eyebrows to be raised. EA has therefore felt the need to foster an honest discussion on civil society in the East. With this pamphlet, conceptualised and written entirely by active citizens based in CEE countries (except for this short preface), EA hopes to trigger discussion on the role of civil society, and even of the "uncivil" society in CEE and beyond. Europe can only find a way out of this crisis with a pivotal role of Central and Eastern Europeans, whose collective memory of a recent systemic crisis can provide necessary insight towards a solution to Europe's crisis that comes from its citizens, civil on uncivil as they may be.

Introduction

Agnes Gagyi & Mariya Ivancheva



This pamphlet grew out of the authors' observation and experience of an ever more profound division between civil society and political activism in post-socialist East-Central Europe. In the last decades of the Cold War, the dissident discourse and practice of civil society was seen as the main alternative vision and organizational form the region had to offer at the dawn of state socialism. The celebratory accounts of dissident civil society in East-Central Europe peaked with the 1989 mostly "peaceful revolutions". Two decades on, intellectual and political elites home and abroad are still focusing on the dissident preoccupations with freedom of speech and expression, thus eclipsing the larger problems of growing insecurity and poverty in all the countries in the region. Twenty years after its alleged success to bring socialism down, dissident civil society is discredited for the majority of the population as an imported, donor-driven model of foreign "soft" intervention through Western European and US-foundations, which sponsor local NGOs: a new resource-intensive market niche where credentials, expert knowledge, and financial capital are accumulated for the elites, and thus remain widely unavailable for the majority of population. At the same time, the concept is still used by the liberal intelligentsia to describe the types of civil mobilization which it recognizes as agreeable: those which are non-violent, "civilized", "cultured", "rational" and seeking cooperation – rather than conflict – with state and market actors.

Problematizing the concept of civil society vis-à-vis its past and present theories and practices in the region, the texts presented here show the way many times the East-West dialogue among equals has been side-tracked by colonizing and auto-colonizing practices of euro-centric elites. In the next pages we present a

number of historical and contemporary case studies where the use of the term "civil society" has been problematic, to say the least. We show the development and demise of a number of past and present movements in the region as a negative background, against which the current raise of an "uncivil" society in the East-Central Europe and beyond can be partly explained. We claim that in order to dissolve the very distinctions between "East" and "West" cooperation between European networks of activists should go beyond the traditional forms of civil society, usually conducted from donor centers in the rich countries in the West, which preempt the possibility of endogenous politics by hierarchic financial and symbolic relations. At the same time, one cannot deny that the tiny but vibrant New Left emerging in East-Central Europe has benefited from Western influences in not just one way: most of the new actors have gained their education in Western Universities that do not treat Marxism with the typical anti-communist prohibition as East-Central European academies still mostly do. Left-wing social movements in the West have also offered a more global view of politics and inequalities that complicates the European East/West axis with the rich North/South dichotomy. Along these lines, new cooperation is only now starting. This pamphlet is, hopefully, one of its first documents. With this text we very much hope to provoke debate and critical reflection that can aid radical practice in the recently evolving endogenous forms of political mobilization that have started slowly to emerge, but ever more visible in our crisis-stricken region.

We claim that in order to dissolve the very distinctions between "East" and "West", cooperation between European networks of activists should go beyond the traditional forms of civil society, usually conducted from donor centers in the rich countries in the West.

The rise and fall of civil society in East-Central Europe

Agnes Gagyi & Mariya Ivancheva



The concept of civil society, when applied to East-Central Europe, is connected to a hierarchical narrative of transition from socialism to post-socialism. This narrative renders Western models of modernization as more developed, more civilized and more worthy than East-Central European societies. In this hierarchical relationship, any resemblance to Western (ideals of) society is evaluated as positive, while differences gain automatically a negative value, and are interpreted as anomalies. Civil society has been one of the social dimensions conceived in the space of this East-West hierarchy. East-Central European civil society was not thought to be significant because of the actual power of local grassroots organising, but because it was understood to be



Photo by Emil Florea

an element of Western democracy taking root in less developed Eastern grounds. This situation makes the denotative use of “civil society” as an empirical term to East-Central European societies problematic, as it hides the normative roots of the term. Avoiding this theoretical and practical trap would allow transnational activism in the region to be through beyond the East-West axis. The history of Western modernization is interlinked with the history of global domination. The story of civil society in East-Central Europe is yet another chapter in the same history. That history includes colonialism and the Cold War just as much as the post-colonial project of global development and the post-socialist project of transition – the latter two subordinating Third World and Eastern European economies to Western financial markets and symbolic hierarchies.

Reemergence of civil society in the last decades of the Cold War

To understand civil society as it functioned in the 1980s in East-Central Europe, one needs to question how and why precisely this rich historical concept reemerged there and then. Dissident self-organization and smuggled samizdat writings under repressive state socialist regimes were a central inspiration of the newly emergent theory. Yet, the history and theory of “civil society” in the late 1980s was not written only by the dissidents. After the violent suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the Soviet intervention in the 1968 Prague spring, and the rise of the Solidarity movement in the late 1970s, left-wing intellectuals in the West realized the illusion of “really existing socialism”. They started venturing behind the Iron curtain seeking cooperation between intellectuals from the opposite blocs of the Cold War. On the side of the Western activists, this cooperation was built with the urgency of issues such as nuclear disarmament, human rights, and environmental protection in mind. They expressed a profound disillusionment with the welfare state, the complic-

ity of the Western powers in imperialist wars in the developing world, and the apocalyptic expectations of the “Doomsday” of a nuclear war between the two opposite blocks of the Cold War. The attempts of the Western peaceniks to attract new activists from “the other Europe” to share their global worries were often far from adequate. The new language of insecurity they spoke (using terms like *détente*, *disarmament*, and *peace*) seemed far-fledged for people surviving state socialism that spoke the language of unfreedom. Despite their explicit differences, the dialogue was built on a newly realized shared interest. Representatives throughout Europe used it to raise voices against the centralized power of both the welfare and the socialist state which bureaucratized every sphere of life, weakening social solidarity, autonomy and participation under the weight of consumption, efficiency and growth.

The debates between Eastern and Western intellectuals before 1989 voiced the significance of civic activism in the gradual collapse of state-socialism. They gave a tribune to some prominent dissidents from East-Central Europe like Adam Michnick, Gyorgy Konrad, Janos Kis, Václav Benda and Václav Havel. They were praised for having developed the ‘ferment’ of what was later recognized as a civil society in Eastern Europe: the grassroots initiatives and civic association, which functioned despite the suppressions and violation of human rights. Based on the Western publication and interpretations of their writings, throughout the 1980s various articles and volumes on civil society were published in the West. They marked the beginning of a theoretical re-definition of the term “civil society”, creating sustained interest by “influential allies” in the region. Thanks to this process, by the late 1980s civil society had become the exchange “currency” of the East-West intellectual dialogue. In reference to these publications and debates, by the end of the 20th century, the intellectual tradition of civil society had split into two opposing camps. The liberal theory discussed the institutionalized civil society in

the western liberal-democracies and its global application in the polities of development, democratization and governance. The opponent Gramscian theory insisted on a new interest in new social movements, civil rights activism and liberation struggles in the third world.

However, voices carving the 1989 understanding of civil society were far from unified and monotonous. The works of the latter were often more popular in the West than in their own country. Western publications often championed one dissident voice to represent a variety of voices and oppositions on the ground. What is nowadays called “the 1989 concept of civil society”, was named differently by each prominent dissident: “anti-politics” (Konrad), “independent life of society” or “life in truth” (Havel), “parallel polis” and “second culture” (Benda), “new evolutionism” (Michnik) etc. The distinction comprised at least three divergent political messages behind the civil society concept, about avoiding engagement with, using instrumentally and from afar, and simply taking over the state. In the aftermath of 1989, different aspects of the ideal were recuperated by controversial ideologies in the western academic literature.

Civil society in the aftermath of 1989

Despite local variation and complexity, the dissident idea of civil society as a normative concept of social change and evolution was largely received in the West as a return to democratic liberalism, a “rectifying revolution”. European civil society was interpreted in the context of a celebrated final victory of (Western) liberal democracy over (Eastern) socialism at the end of the Cold War. On this ground, the application of the notion of civil society in East-Central European transition happened in an international context where neoliberal policies became dominant. Civil society – i.e. the NGO sector – had to fill the void in the social functions the state has withdrawn from.

A number of critical evaluations of the promises of civil society appeared from 1989 on. One of the criticisms was that these ideas were limited to a circle of East-Central European intellectuals who formulated them. Another problematic issue was that several forms of civil mobilization that actually happened in post-socialist societies were contradictory to its normative ideals. While from 1990 on, resources were directed at creating the good civil society, instances of spontaneous organizing - which often contained nationalistic elements - were distinguished from legitimate civil organizing as “uncivil society”. Other critics of the application of the notion of civil society to the post-socialist world condemned its connection to former anti-communist crusades. Heavily sponsored by international organizations and individual “democracy-makers”, the latter promoted democratic ideals, but did not threaten the strategic and economic goals of Western governments and businesses. Critics also pointed at the ineffectiveness of the autonomous ideal of civil activism, unconnected to basic relations of political and economic power. Locally, former proponents of the civil society idea featured a general disillusionment with the performance of East-Central European societies compared to their ideals.



Photo by Tomáš Halász / www.tomashalasz.com

The intellectual debate was split between those who wanted to ascribe the pre-1989 notion of civil society to previously existing schools of thought and those who preferred a critique of the post-1989 “NGO-ization” of civil society in East-Central Europe; between accusations and apologies of the post-1989 “betrayal” of the alleged moral ideal of civil society. This contradiction points out how much the ideal of civil society was part of an intellectual program of the regime change, and not an empirically grounded descriptive term. It also points out that public intellectuals who stood up for the ideals of civil society were negligent of actual social processes when formulating their ideals. When their analysis proved to be limited to smaller circles, instead of initiating new reflection they devaluated the constituency of the democracies they were to build. In front of the grim reality, their ideal of civil society was reinforced as an anticipated utopia that has not come.

A new wave of civic activism: the Globalization critical movement

In the early 2000's, the term “civil society” featured in new form in theories of global civil society, and also appeared in the self-reflection of the globalization-critical movement. This concept has been applied by globalization-critical groups in East-Central Europe as well. The new concept of global civil society was born in a specific moment of the political history of the “globalization debate”, when the globalist coalition of political and economic liberalism split in the second half of the 1990's, and political liberals started to speak about an autonomous civil society as counterpower to economic globalization. Critics of the concept related this idea of civil autonomy to the context of neoliberal political programs, where ‘civil society’ merely occupied the space the neoliberal state has withdrawn from, and its influence was limited to this ‘autonomous’ space.

In the case of East-Central European alterglobalization ac-

tivists, the idea of global civil society took a specific shape. Although theoretically equal in the universal space of a global activist network, the practice of these groups was determined by a peripheral position in the international movement infrastructure. Instead of enabling relevant and effective political action, the framework of “global civil society” served more as a solution in identity construction. It freed political activism from the “bad student” position of the “post-socialist transition” narrative. At the same time it reinstated a hierarchically subordinating East-West division in terms of infrastructural centre vs. periphery. On both ends of the dialogue, “catching up” and communicating with the Western centre of the movement became an aim that excluded reflections on the Eastern movement’s actual position. In face of Western movement models, East-Central European activists began to consider their local contexts as inferior. In the meantime, a radical right-wing anti-globalism, which emphasized the value of local context over global market, continued to gain power.

Neither the dynamic of the East-Central European alterglobalization movement, nor that of its “evil twin” – the rise of a globalization-critique from the extreme right – can be sufficiently explained within the mainstream framework of “civil society” or “social movement” research, which implies basic, often explicitly normative assumptions regarding a hierarchical, developmental narrative of democratization. Within this framework, Eastern European civil society is bound to appear as an “anomaly”. In order to understand the actual process of democratization in East-Central European transition, and the place of people’s participation in it, we will need to go beyond this hierarchical, normative concept of civil society.

Such a reflection on the transnational history of the concept of civil society is more than necessary when thinking about the possibilities of regional or global collective action in the face of the present crisis. Contemporary interpretations of the crisis in East-Central Europe are deeply rooted in the hierarchical devel-

opmental framework of the regime change and post-socialist transition. As an example, in Hungary, the democratic opposition movement against Viktor Orbán’s conservative government considers neoliberal Europe as its ally for democracy. They close their eyes before all signs of conflict between democracy and the market in the EU, and invite neoliberal ex-prime minister Gordon Bajnai to lead their coalition. This expresses the split characteristic to the region, between “civil” (freedom of speech, democratic procedures) and “social” causes (jobs, benefits, services). The Hungarian example shows that this split can contribute to both local and European Union-level politics top-down imposition of elite interests and inhuman austerity.

Conclusion

In this light it becomes ever more obvious that the heritage of East-West developmental hierarchy results in deficiencies of orientation that will have a strong effect on further political developments. Based on the analysis we have outlined above, we suggest that the normative notion of civil society be reinterpreted taking account of the following points:

1. Historical position of its proponents

Normative talk on civil society should be interpreted together with the positions of those speaking it. Critical views of the role of intellectuals in regime change are also informative in this respect. Research on the role and position of intellectuals in this process is quite large, and can be used to recontextualize the civil society idea in a wider social framework.

2. East-West hierarchy

Cooperation between East and West European networks of activists has to go beyond the traditional forms of civil society, usually conducted as channels of elite interests

that use donor centres in the rich countries in the West to outmanoeuvre local political actors and realities. To reconstruct the historical experience and contemporary reality of Eastern Europe on the map of collective debates over the global crisis, we need a different structure of East-East and East-West dialogues, also opening new perspectives for global hierarchies beyond these divides.

3. Critical reinterpretation of the hierarchical framework of “transition”

Dissident discourse on civil society and its applications during the “transition” process connect to a wider discursive frame of European reintegration, of “returning to Europe”. Transition as “return” implies a framework of hierarchical development, that treats an idealized model of Western modernization as the objective aim of history, and renders any other society – such as post-socialist or post-colonial societies – as inferior, less civilized or less worthy on the historical scale of value dominated by Western modernization. The fallacy of Western-led modernization theory should be included in the analysis of the normative concept and top-down prescribed practice of civil society.

With this text we very much hope to provoke debate and dialogue over East-Central European local mobilizations as realities. We wish to start a discussion of the region as embedded in a global context, and not as low-quality “backward” copy of Western models, as theories of post-socialist civil society have often implied.

Debating the commons in post-socialist Bulgaria

Mariya Ivancheva



The concept of “the commons” – basic goods and services that are managed by and serve the interest of the community that produces them – has suddenly attracted the attention of various European theorists and activists alike. A European Charter of “the commons” was drafted in early 2012 at the International University College in Turin. Italy has recently experienced a successful process of reclaiming “the commons”, with a successful referendum that stopped the privatization of water services and occupations of public theatres around the country – pioneered by Teatro Valle, Rome’s first public theatre – which gave an example of horizontally organized shared management. In other European countries solidarity has been built around the question of water (Austria, Germany) and shelter (Spain, France). A pan-European campaign was staged against the ACTA agreement in order to guard intellectual rights. Last but not least, European Alternatives staged a number of transnational forums, discussing successes and challenges to different campaigns reclaiming the commons in Western and Eastern Europe.

All these campaigns signalled that the banner of “the commons” could bring together vastly disparate sectors of the population. However, the example of the recent protests against the privatization of protected land in Bulgaria indicates some cross-currents not only in the theoretical approach but also in practically dealing with “the commons”.

In the last half-decade Bulgaria – arguably the most passive country in Southeast Europe – has witnessed a persistent wave of protests. These mobilizations, mainly carried out in the capital city Sofia, erupted in 2007 and were triggered by the increasing privatization of and construction on protected land. This process was accelerated by two laws: one adopted in 1999 which transferred the ownership of state land to municipalities who then eagerly started selling it to entrepreneurs; another adopted in 2005 which allowed citizens of the EU to buy land in Bulgaria and triggered a massive wave of unregulated construction that turned water sources, soils, and natural habitats into concrete wastelands. In 2007, 34.3% of Bulgaria’s territory became protected under the Natura2000 network of the European Commission, supervised by the Directives of Birds and of Habitat. Subsequently the Commission prosecuted Bulgaria for breaching all these agreements.

While subsequent Bulgarian governments were manoeuvring between lobby group interests and EU incentives, protests emerged. Networks of environmental activists mobilized against the destruction of protected land in 2007. Later they joined other protests. The debates in Parliament on the law on genetically



Photo by Emil Florea

modified organisms (GMOs), shale-gas fracking, and the secretive subscription of Bulgaria to the ACTA agreement were paralleled by protests and spontaneous flash-mobs around Sofia. As a result, the National Assembly voted against shale-gas fracking and the production, trade, and research of GMO products.

In 2012 participants in previous protests and further citizens joined the mass demonstration against the Forestry Act, which was amended in favour of the private interest of Tseko Minev, the head of First Investment Bank. His company “Yulen Ltd” which owns a number of lucrative ski-tourism installations in Pirin built on protected land, wanted to expand its activities to further restricted areas. The Act was approved in Parliament on June 13. The same evening thousands of people gathered in the streets of Sofia demanding that the President veto the Act. The next day Prime Minister Boyko Borissov met representatives of environmental organizations, and promised a moratorium on construction in protected territories. He put pressure on President Rossen Plevneliev who immediately vetoed the law. The Forestry Act was passed by the Bulgarian Parliament, this time without the controversial clauses.

Many ecological activists heralded the protests as a success. Yet, can we say that this phenomenon spells good news for the resurgence of the struggle for “the commons” and a debate on alternatives to neoliberal capitalism? Is it a sign that a sense of social (if not socialist) solidarity has been preserved despite the brutal privatization in the region since 1989?

The Forestry Act protesters in Sofia adopted “cool” protest repertoires inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement and other anti-austerity campaigns. However, while a few anti-capitalist slogans appeared at the protests, the majority of protesters refused to see the Forest Act as a component of a wider process of capitalist accumulation. The main slogan: “Tseko off Aleko!”, demanded that the oligarch keeps his hands off the Aleko peak, overseeing Sofia. Yet no claims were made against other oligarchic practices in other sectors, or against the government that

allowed these. Capitalism was only seen as problematic in its local – allegedly “oriental” or “Balkan”, and thus wrong – perversion. The opinions voiced in the squares and in online forums were mostly concerned with the intrusion against the consumption and leisure of the well-deserving hard-working middle class. The first days of spontaneous protests had no official permission. Once representatives of the environmental movement met Boyko Borissov, they widely advised protesters against street occupations. Instead, protesters were asked to bring ski equipment and identify themselves as skiers. In a country where one-day hire of a rope-line at a ski-resort, costs over 25 euros and the minimum monthly wage is set at 145 Euro, ski has become a sport prohibitively expensive for the majority of the population. Yet the “skiers” made no claims for cheaper and accessible ski or recreation services. At the same time, people living in the protected mountainous regions took a stand against the “skiers”. For many of these people, the possibility of selling their land and the promise of getting a job promised by regional developers was the only alternative to a poverty-ridden existence. The response of the protesters against the Forestry Act to these concerns: “They will understand us. They also love the forest”.

This hardly comes as a surprise. From the start of their movements, the environmental activists showed no concern about the privatization beyond protected lands. In 2007, months after the ecological protests, thousands of teachers went on a two-month-long strike. Without the support from other networks they only achieved a humiliating 18% increase in salaries. Subsequent protests by miners and railroad workers received certain concessions, but not the solidarity of big town middle class youngsters – the typical environmental activists. Most striking was the lack of reaction of the environmentalists to the increase of the price of electricity by 13%, which coincided with the mobilization against the Forestry Act. In Bulgaria 2.2 million out of a total population of 7.7 million are pensioners – each earning

around 75 Euros per month. This increase meant that electricity bills could exceed half the monthly pension. While days before this increase thousands of Bulgarians went onto the streets to demand the preservation of the forest, the increase in electricity prices did not receive support from environmental campaigners. Protests staged within these activist silos brought to the streets around 10-20 people.

The protests in Bulgaria show that for most people who grew up imbued with neoliberal ideology nurtured by anti-communist and anti-communal narratives – a hegemonic public discourse in Eastern Europe since 1989 – the idea of “the commons” does not make much sense. Many prefer an opt-in and opt-out strategy: they stand against the privatization of nature and for the privatization of industry and services; against the pollution of water and soil, but for the private property and “management” thereof; against the cutting of funds in the education sector, but for “efficiency” and individual survival by competition within the labour market.

The use of the concept of the commons in the post-socialist world introduces another level of complexity. In his recent piece Joan Subirats argues: “When we talk about ‘the commons’, we must invariably refer to the community and the relationships that sustain and run it”. Walter Mignolo claims that when moving out of the European context, the appropriate category is not “the commons”, but instead “the communal” as local populations share forms of communal living and resource management that resist both capitalism and occidentalism. This approach is,

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however, inappropriate for East-central Europe, where endogenous forms of communal management and resistance have long disappeared, thanks to paternalistic state socialism and the subsequent brutal privatization of every sphere of economic life. To speak of “communal” property and management of resources in contemporary Bulgaria – and arguably in other post-socialist countries – is slightly embarrassing. In Bulgarian the term “community” does not translate and is only used in policy documents of Western developmentalist agencies.

The Bulgarian case is also alarming for another, more dangerous reason. The rising extreme right has successfully jeopardized the discussion of “the commons”. In an article published in an online publication of the extreme-right party Ataka, which has held seats in the Bulgarian parliament since 2005, the Bolivian water wars of 1999-2000 were discussed as a bright example for reclaiming common goods on behalf of indigenous ethnic populations. The other significant party on the extreme right, VMRO, has started a campaign in support of Bulgarian families whose electricity or water supply was cut off by the now-private owners of what were before nationally owned and managed services. The latter party has recently proposed a grass-roots referendum against the management of water resources by French



Photo by Emil Florea

monopolist Veolia Ltd. In all these instances, the extreme right has been claiming “the commons” not on behalf of all people, but for the sake of “ethnically pure” Bulgarians. They have been blaming Roma, Turkish and migrant minorities for the concessions the state makes to them at the expense of Bulgarians. This highly distorted version of reality has entered the mainstream media and has been adopted by circles much broader than the electorate of the extremists.

This reframing of “the commons” by neo-nationalists signals a deeper crisis of both theory and practice. We still live in a world in which resources and primary goods are abundant mostly at places where local populations live with extremely little and labour to provide countries with few locally abundant basic “commons” of their own, with excessive consumption goods. When speaking of European primary goods such as food, oil, and services, we cannot forget that they often come from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Thus, the reclamation of “the universal commons” remains a highly colonialist practice. Against this background, the overall problem of whether “the commons” are national, local, regional or universal remains central to the debate. In recent years the question of national sovereignty over basic resources is pushed off the political agenda with an air of superiority typical both of the liberal and the Left’s cosmopolitan pretence to universal entitlement. Their discourses remain strikingly short-sighted, focusing too often on access to “the commons” in order to provide consumption and leisure for elites and not wider redistribution of goods and services.

Thus, in contexts where “the communal” is not to be found in recent layers of history it urgently needs to be manufactured anew, avoiding both the nationalist, and the colonial trap.

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Case Study

Czech Republic

Wake-up call for the civil society

Ilona Švihlíková



Czech civic activism has experienced a boom since 2010, with the May Parliamentary elections being the milestone. After the shock from victory of right-oriented political parties with and austerity reforms, incredible activity started to sprout in the previously dormant society.

Already before the crucial 2010 elections, there were social movements and initiatives, but their public impact remained either regional or issue-specific. Worth mentioning in this period are the attempts to create a Social forum in the Czech Republic, with an important participation of the academic sphere, and the activities of the Trade Unions as the biggest organization able to organize large demonstrations and other types of protests.

After the critical loss of the Left in 2010, new types of organizations started to emerge, both trying to explain what happened and offer intellectual support for social issues – think-tanks and civic organizations actively trying to fight to government.

One of the first, emerging shortly before the elections, was Alternativa Zdola (Alternative from Below) coming with community-type activities like the participatory budgeting, social living and community work, but also topics of economic democracy in practice and energy and food sufficiency.

Proalt, founded shortly after the election by intellectuals

and university teachers, quickly evolved into the biggest anti-government civic organization. Proalt took the task to expertly criticize the government's proposals (be it in economic, social or environmental sphere) and became the main organizer of protests of various kinds.

Many other civic organizations started to be active and the scene got quite chaotic, as organizations stopped existing after internal disputes, changed names etc. More than two years after, it could be said that there are still many different organizations and many new still emerging, however there are some key actors.

Hnutí za přímou demokracii (Movement for direct democracy) – as the name reflects, has its agenda and actively participates in many kinds of protests. Besides pushing the topic of referenda and fundamental changes of the political system, it was also very active in protests against the so-called “church-restitutions”, which involved “returning” to churches property worth tens of billions of Czech crowns (including fields, woods etc.). However, the opponents claim that the churches (especially the catholic church) never owned so much property, and used only to be a caretaker.

Iniciativa za demisi vlády (Initiative for the government's resignation) had an interesting way of emerging. It started as a new social movement on Facebook, but unlike many oth-

ers was able to “materialize”. It also has an advantage over the others: its structure is spread throughout the whole Czech Republic. It is a problem that many activities and also activists are concentrated in Prague and other big cities have difficulties in creating an activist network. This initiative was able to organize a Festival for the government’s resignation with debates, cultural programme and information stands of about 20 different organizations.

Not only civic movements, but also many think-tanks emerged and are active still today. Worth mentioning are CESTA (created by social-democrats) that organizes conferences and discussions on mostly political topics. MDA is also connected with the social-democrats, however it has regional branches and holds many interesting meetings, discussions and conferences in the whole republic, connecting intellectuals, entrepreneurs, trade unionists etc.

Pražská škola alternativ (Prague school of alternatives) should not be forgotten, as it is a unique project of citizen education presenting various topics ranging from community media, guerilla gardening, cooperatives to unemployment, alternatives to the current financial system, the commons. Its current winter-term topic of de-privatization should lead to a programme submitted to opposition parties.

As new organizations were emerging, it became necessary to cooperate and evolve mechanisms for common action. There have been many attempts, however the situation remains complicated. The Czech nation is notorious for its disunity that had tragic dimensions in the past. One of the efforts has been the Forum Alternativ that should serve as a free discussion platform. Alternativa Zdola has put stress on networking from the beginning and remains the key actor in this field. That was also the reason why it started cooperating with European Alternatives.

Now, there are preparations for an internet-platform for common organizing, a calendar of events and programme-intersection. However, it should be noted that only a few organizations actually have a programme of what they want. Mostly, there is a strong opposition towards the government, but not such a clear idea what to do after the resignation of the government.

Another platform is SPaS (Spojenectví práce a solidarity – The Alliance of Labour and Solidarity). This is very specific example, as it is probably the best working but also the most controversial, as it also includes political parties. The attitude towards political parties is quite fiery, as many civic organizations turn down all parties automatically as part of a political system they want to do away with.

Trade unions soon realized that although the civil society is waking up, they are still (besides the political parties) the only actor that could organize bigger protest events. Before the biggest demonstration in April 2012 with more than 120,000 demonstrators, the Trade unions started a cooperation platform with some civic initiatives. The platform is called Stop vládě (Stop the government) and is in fact still searching to define its range of activities.

All in all, “something” is going on. But to be realistic, most people are still very passive. Many of them are waiting for a new “leader” that will solve their problems and are not prepared to be active themselves. Neither the previous, nor the current regime had interest in supporting civil society. People are slowly learning how to cooperate, how to trust one another. There is a real “hunger” for different information than what the official media present. Many organizations do not have a concrete idea what to do “afterwards”; some have highly unrealistic ideas. But the shift is there. The civil society is not dormant anymore. It is awakened, maybe weak, not united, but it is here.

Privatization of despair: Romania's healthcare system reform

Cristian Suciu



In January 2012, after more than two years of unprecedented austerity policies (25% cuts of salaries in the public sector, 15% cuts of unemployment benefits), the public reaction to the new healthcare legislation, especially the attempts to partially privatise it, was greeted by many as the first sign of breaking the circle of generalised apathy, and the first step in the rebirth of a genuine civil society. Activist milieus in Romania or elsewhere equated the protests with the emergence of a movement to reconsider and reclaim the common goods that have been obscured by two decades of anti-communist neo-liberal discourse and massive privatisations. The fact that other movements joined in, particularly those against the privatisation of natural resources and against ACTA might support such a view. However, this is simply too optimistic.

In fact, the protests sparked as a moral reaction to the abuse by the country's President of the acclaimed and widely respected Palestinian-born Dr. Raed Arafat, under-secretary of health at the time. After Dr. Arafat repeatedly expressed his concerns on the effects of privatisation of the emergency system, which he had developed from scrap over the last 20 years, the President called him "a leftist" live on TV. Dr. Arafat, otherwise known for his moderate liberal views, resigned shortly afterwards from his position. Not only is Dr. Arafat a symbolic figure in Romania, but also SMURD (Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication) has a special place in the post-communist Romanian imaginary, seen as the only functioning part of the public healthcare system. The stakes seemed to have been very high,

with reports of private investors linked to top politicians already having purchased ambulances, in the expectation that the new law would be adopted...

Many other aspects in the new legislation were seriously jeopardising the equal access to healthcare, but none caught the interest of the public as much as the issue of the emergency system. Nevertheless, many still consider privatisation as the miracle solution for the current situation.

With an average of 8 months spent in office, 19 ministers have tried to reform the system over the last 15 years. However, Romania spends less on healthcare than any other country in the European Union, and because of the crisis it is spending even less (3.6% of GDP, less than half the share that UK allocates, and a third of Germany's). To the chronic underfunding we should add the brain-drain of medical staff (since 2007, almost 5,000 doctors – 1 in 10 – have left Romania for Western Europe). The system is also ravaged by corruption: bribing the under-paid medical staff is the patients' way of alleviating the fear of not being cured and the way pharmaceutical companies get contracts. There is no



Photo by Emil Florea

doubt that this is the result of deliberate neglect to the benefit of private enterprise. Even so, privatisation is preferable to the close to Kafkian experience many have in Romanian public hospitals.

The problem with the old law was that underfunded public hospitals could not “compete fairly” with the private ones, risking bankruptcy and being taken over, in the end, by private investors. Besides privatisation, the new legislation brought the logic of the market to the heart of the public system, allowing public hospitals to introduce fees for medical services. Leaving aside the reduced access to healthcare, in a few years the difference of prices between private and public hospitals would be remote. That would push for further privatisation, since tax payers might become reluctant to support a system supposedly based on solidarity but in fact just as expensive as the private one.

It seems however, unlikely that market and competition is the solution to a chronically underfunded and corrupt healthcare system, in other words the transformation of medical services into merchandise, often too expensive for too many. Rather the greater and continuous pressure on state institutions to use efficiently and indiscriminately the resources that they have should



Photo by Emil Florea

do the trick. The state is not the enemy here, but the private interest that seeks new niches and profits in the realm of public services and common goods.

Some see signs of hope. Thanks to the protests, the new legislation has been blocked, with the issue still on the table and the promise that next time the reform will be publicly debated; unlike before when it was done behind the closed doors of the presidential residence. Dr. Arafat is now the minister of healthcare in the new socialist-liberal government and is apparently given free hand. Considering his symbolic capital that was expected: general elections are due next month, and the socialist-liberal coalition needs to increase its chances to win. Minister Arafat is now trying to change completely the procedures of acquisitions in public medical facilities only to face significant resistance within the system. He also imposed limits to the prices of cancer medication. The response of pharmaceutical corporations was to cease imports and distribution.

Unfortunately, Dr. Arafat announced that he is not willing to remain minister after the elections, preferring a rather “technocratic” position and to continue consolidating the emergency system. He fears that the toxic combination between political and economic interests, coming from pharmaceutical companies and the ever-growing private medical sector would put too much pressure on any government to come, and make his efforts obsolete.

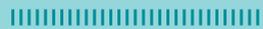
The myth of the providential saviour has, as it seems, its limits. However, if people were to take to the streets again to defend the healthcare system, then the assessment on the 2012 protests would not seem overly optimistic.

It seems unlikely that market and competition is the solution to a chronically underfunded and corrupt healthcare system, in other words the transformation of medical services into merchandise, often too expensive for too many.

Case Study

BAO – Bratislava otvorene

Pavel Suska



BAO or Bratislava otvorene (Open Bratislava) is an initiative which represents the most visible group engaging in activities against the destruction of valuable places within the city. Indeed, too many different places have been lost in the last 20 years in the city of Bratislava. Several parks, plazas, historical landmarks, and green spaces are gone, mostly because of the unscrupulousness of private investors searching for profit through land development, and because of the mismanagement of city officials who were unable to defend wider public interests. Particular aims, strategies and organizational forms of this initiative have been transformed in reaction to a wide range of societal changes and political opportunities during the last two decades.

Two key historical sources formed the leading figures, ideological and organizational backgrounds and ideas about activities of the emerging association. The first was an environmental protectionist organization during the era of state socialism. Under the umbrella of Bratislava branches of the Slovak Union of Nature and Landscape Protectors (SZOPK) a unique grassroots environment evolved, to certain extent independent from structures of the authoritarian regime. Although most of the Union's activities were uncontroversial, some members politicized during the 80s. One of the reasons was quite a hysterical reaction of the regime to a pamphlet that critically analyzed Bratislava's urban environment. The

document was titled Bratislava nahlas (Bratislava Aloud), to which the name of current initiative refers. Many of the leading figures and members took part in the events of November 1989 and although most of them later chose different paths and exploited new opportunities brought by the regime change, the network of occasional supporters has remind notable even within the new elite. The second important source of the urban social movement development was the local branches of the western NGOs established in Slovakia and Bratislava since the early 90s.



Photo by Martin Šveda

Several differences between the two groups, an absence of grievances caused by the significant impact on urban environment (even compared to the capitals and cities in neighbour countries) and the struggle over the future character of the state facing authoritarian tendencies, contributed to a shift of the focus elsewhere and hindered different groups and activists in closer local cooperation during the first decade of the post-socialist transformation.

After stabilizing a firm pro-west and pro-integration course of the young country (which happened in Slovakia only in the late 90s), specific problems began manifesting themselves locally. The strongly neoliberal transformation agenda has brought a quick integration into the system of global capitalism, while its one-sided emphasis on economic reforms has caused the formation of an underdeveloped institutional environment. The rapidly increasing investment activities in a non-transparent and unregulated environment have caused



Photo by Martin Šveda

many clashes of interests and conflicts. Losses of public spaces, destruction of many historical buildings and artefacts, and a reduction of already scarce greenery and parks, most of which have had to give way to private investments in shopping malls, mushrooming office buildings or lucrative residential projects, were all sensitive issues.

Along with a growing building activity and related grievances, different groups and individuals have got more and more interconnected in their oppositional activities. A participatory deficit, common across spaces of post-socialism, is compensated by a network of activists which may not be numerous but is effective.

The peak of both the pressure on urban environment and of the protective activities took place in the second decade of the transition. Another formative characteristic of this period was the lack of public engagement in decision-making by the town hall. Several cases have indicated rather suspicious connections between city officials and developers and investors.

The arrogance of the former city representation helped to extend the spectrum of activist strategies used to gain support and to influence the decision-making processes. Besides the traditional methods of thematizing burning issues and problems in urban governance, organizing protest and supporting community groups, a new strategy of active involvement in formal local politics has been carried out due to the difficulties in collaboration with official authorities. In 2006, a platform of associated activists using the name "BAO" ran for local election. In this respect, the 2010 election was of particular importance – not because of the success of activists and movements' representatives in terms of the seats in local government, but in bringing the issues of urban environment transformation and urban governance to the front of public

debate, which has eventually led to the replacement of the elected city representatives.

Despite the fact that the new elected officials have declared and even attempted to implement a new political culture, there are still obstacles and challenges to overcome. The institutional environment remains underdeveloped. This is especially visible in the failure to secure participatory and deliberative aspects of urban governance, which are implemented through the good will of the city officials rather than as an obligation resulting from any systemic change. Another area of the institutional underdevelopment is that related to urban planning and construction regulation that would strengthen the transparency of decision making.



Photo by Martin Šveda

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Europe can only find a way out of the current crisis with a pivotal role of Central and Eastern Europeans, whose collective memory of a recent systemic crisis can provide necessary insight towards a solution to Europe's crisis that comes from its citizens. With this pamphlet, grown out of the observation and experience of an ever more profound division between civil society and political activism in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, European Alternatives hopes to trigger debate and critical reflection on the use of the very concept of the so-called "civil society".

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