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ARTICLE

The formation of active civil societies in post-communist States: The challenges and opportunities of a political foundation

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Abstract The Velvet Revolution of 1989 revitalised the concept of civil society in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. This article investigates the new meaning of societas civilis, tracing its evolution from the Aristotelian *koinonia politike* to the modern redefinition by Tocqueville as civil participation in depoliticised societies. An active civil society has been a key component of the European identity, reflecting the idea that freedom implies responsibility and participation. In the transition towards democracy, post-socialist civil societies have emerged, but dissatisfaction with politics has hampered the growth of a full civil society engagement. Nonetheless, the role of civil society is to be preserved and strengthened, for it is a valuable tool for promoting civic virtues in many domains, as the experience of political foundations in Germany has demonstrated.

Keywords Velvet Revolution · Transition to democracy · Civil society · Political participation · European identity · Political foundations

The Velvet Revolution in 1989 revitalized the concept of civil society in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. The article investigates the new meaning of 'societas civilis' tracing its evolution from the Aristotelian «koinonia politike» to the modern redefinition by Tocqueville of civil participation in depoliticised societies. An active civil society has been a key component of European identity, reflecting the idea that freedom implies responsibility and participation. In the transition process to democracy, post-socialist civil societies have emerged, but dissatisfaction with politics hampered the growth of a full civil-society engagement. Nonetheless, the role of civil societies is to be preserved and strengthened for they are a valuable tool to promoted civic virtues in many domains, as is proved by the experience of political foundations in Germany.

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Societas civilis as an expression of European identity

According to the well-known statement by Karl Marx, Europe was haunted by the spectre of communism for about 150 years. The collapse of communist dictatorships was accompanied by the renaissance of a concept, which, like the appearance of a good fairy, was received with great fascination in scientific, political and intellectual circles—the concept of civil society. However, the growing popularity of the term should not deceive us about the vagueness of its meaning. It appears appropriate. therefore, to begin by reducing to its traditional contours the concept of civil society, which is described in a wide variety of contexts as being constantly invoked or else as reviving or decaying.

The almost modish currency of the term may sometimes obscure its origins, which go back to Greek antiquity. Aristotle used the term *koinonia politike* to designate an association of like-minded persons without a ruling institution, describing not a society anterior to the state but a politically united community. The traditional formula 'civitas sive societas civilis sive res publica' (roughly translated: 'the polity, be it a community of citizens, be it a state') starkly expresses the twofold nature of a politically integrated society. Only the structural changes of the late modern age gave rise to a redefinition of the term 'civil society': the centralisation of politics in both absolutist and revolutionary states caused a depoliticised society to emerge, so that civil matters were no longer intimately intertwined with political matters. This separation may be traced back to Tocqueville, who answered the question about the possibility of institutionalising freedom by referring to the exercise of communicative and participatorial freedom through associations in civil and political life. Accordingly, civil society designates a space in which citizens enjoy the political freedom to practice democratic participation in manageable units. Civil society players are involved in politics without striving for public office. Consequently, private groups are as tenuously linked to civil society as political parties, parliaments, or government administrations [1, pp. 58–60].

In this context we cannot disregard the specific and uniting elements of European identity. Europe has a unique history that is largely influenced by three unbroken traditions. Europe succeeded in merging Graeco-Roman antiquity with the heritage of the Enlightenment, maintaining a critical tension between that amalgam and the Judaeo–Christian tradition. Political anthropology and the Christian concept of man as the image of God unite in the idea that the human person is not disposable, an idea on which the European societal model rests. The connection between the freedom and the responsibility of the individual reflects the idea that an active civil society is a feature of European identity. European democracy is founded on consistent and continuous support for a sound civic culture, which underpins the political system largely without regard for its economic and political performance.

The communist heritage—a challenge

During the time when Europe was divided, people in the West lived in a civil society for many years without being aware of it. As a political idea, civil society began to attract attention only after 1989, when it was (re-)imported as a theory. After the demise of bipolarity, it appeared possible again for civil society to become a normative concept uniting East and West [2]. Yet it was soon found that the idea of civil society was conceived in a highly specific context. The first to restore the term 'civil society' to circulation were the civil rights movements in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe

that, struggling for societal transformation against an ossified party bureaucracy, created the space for a societal sphere in organisations and associations outside the state and called it 'civil society'. In the processes of democratisation that began in 1989, civil society became the guiding concept for a society which set its face against the comprehensive claims of the state. The meaning of the term included what was ruled out under an authoritarian system. Thus, one of the classical concepts in the history of political ideas was turned into a fighting slogan under structural conditions that could not be applied to the situation prevailing in the West [1, p. 56]. Accordingly, major differences between East and West are to be found even now in the reality of civil society. The transformation has led to the emergence of post-socialist civil societies featuring structural peculiarities which represent a challenge to all endeavours to deepen democracy in Europe.

Reluctance to participate in politics

Willingness to participate in politics is an absolute prerequisite for any civil society. Therefore, the relationship between participation and civil society is one of close interaction and mutual dependence. As George Bernhard Shaw said, 'Freedom means responsibility'. Many citizens in the post-socialist states have not yet fully appreciated that it is their duty to assume responsibility for themselves as they enjoy their newly won freedom. The precept that citizens should be active, participation-oriented and socially committed is much less influential in these countries than in Western Europe. Because of their experiences under communist rule, people are not really convinced that participation makes any sense at all [3, 21f].

With the exception of a few isolated areas held by the church, it was the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and its 'front organisations' which in the German democratic republic (GDR) occupied the 'space anterior to politics'—a somewhat unsuitable designation. Endeavours to involve the entire population in these socialist organisations may be regarded as typical of the authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Before the Velvet Revolution of 1989, numerous organisations of this type operated in all countries, uniting most of the socialist population. Their range extended from youth clubs, trade unions and cultural organisations to nature lovers and stamp collectors. Acting as socialisation agencies, recruitment reservoirs and service providers, these organisations performed functions not dissimilar to those provided by civil society organisations in a liberal democratic context [4, p. 185]. As such, they provided important anchor points for the civil societies that began to form after the collapse of the socialist regimes. However, they crucially differed from civil-society organisations in the Western sense in that they were dependent on the regime and repressed those who refused to become members. It is the latter point especially that explains why the level of organisation in political parties and trade unions is relatively low today, for both were set up as 'central institutions to facilitate mobilisation from above', so that they may justifiably be called remnants of the socialist regimes.

High regard for private networks

The absence of a democratic culture and of political participation is deeply rooted in the post-socialist countries after decades of governmental social tutelage. As any move to establish societal pluralism was nipped in the bud, the majority of the population retreated

into a passively neutral attitude towards the regime, allowing itself to be pushed into the private sphere which remained largely untouched by the government. Because no system of free associations existed, family and friendship networks played a greater role in these societies than they did in Western Europe. One reason why private networks assumed such great importance in people's lives was that they could be put to economic use in everyday existence. Although less tightly knit now than before the transformation, these networks still constitute a key point of reference in everyday life. Voluntary associations, which can be founded now that communism has collapsed, are not generally given preference over existing social networks of the kind described above [5, p. 4].

Another reason why private networks are still so highly esteemed today is the marked distrust towards formal organisations of any kind—a relic from the socialist past when most people were involved in numerous organisations. When not obligatory, membership served to secure personal advantages. Career opportunities were often predicated on membership in socialist 'front organisations', and governmental control was the rule. Consequently, many citizens associated membership in these organisations with coercion. Even today, many people see no difference between the communist mass organisations and the new voluntary associations, a fact that considerably impairs the legitimacy of the latter.

Challenging the legitimacy of civil society engagement

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, civil society opposition reached the peak of its career in 1989–1990. In the beginning, the proliferation of civil society organisations that accompanied the guarantee of the freedom of association in the new constitutions was observed with benevolent tolerance by the new political elites; after all, quite a number of their members came from an opposition background. However, this situation changed when the elected constitutional organs were confronted with the difficult task of economic and social reconstruction [6, p. 218]. Against this background, the legitimacy of civil society organisations was increasingly questioned and their influence curtailed because of their nonexistent electoral mandate. Governments began to adopt an attitude of cool reserve towards the sector and its organisations. What is more, numerous post-socialist ministerial bureaucracies have preserved a pronouncedly 'statist' mindset, which makes it difficult for them to accept any novel concepts of governance [5, p. 5]. This being so, the legitimacy of civil society engagement is questioned both by the citizens and the state.

Lack of trust in political institutions

In the new Länder of the Federal Republic of Germany, trust in institutions is at a comparatively low ebb. It is lowest as far as the Federal Parliament and government are concerned. In other words, the lack of political trust affects precisely those organisations that lend a concrete shape to a democracy that is supported by competing political parties: first, the parties themselves; second, the government; third, parliament; and last and most immediately, those politicians who are active in parties, parliaments and governments [3, p. 20].

This lack of trust in political institutions stems not only from a general distrust towards the state, which had a bad record under socialism, but there is also a close link between this lack of trust and the general disappointment in the performance of the state. Surveys of the political culture in east-central Europe, such as Eurobarometer, document the fact that

satisfaction with political results is on the decline almost everywhere. However, it is not only the allegedly bad performance of politics that produces such profound disappointment but also the great expectations nursed by post-socialist societies, particularly with regard to welfare state benefits, which cannot possibly be met by the state. Thus, people are disenchanted with the new system, and their civil society engagement is dwindling as a consequence.

Civil society as the key to the successful consolidation of democracy

The structural forms of the post-socialist civil societies fail to confirm the optimistic expectations of O'Donnell and Schmitter [10, p. 49], who predicted that civil society engagement among the population of east-central Europe would boom after the collapse of the socialist system. At the same time, the pessimistic scenario drawn up by Ralf Dahrendorf in 1990 appears overcritical: in his opinion, post-socialist societies had suffered so much damage that about three generations would be needed to re-establish a democratic civil society. In the post-socialist process of transformation, the relationship between the state and civil society was essentially governed by two factors: the new elites were confronted with the problem of ensuring civil society engagement by providing conditions for an adequate legal framework without challenging the legitimacy of democratically elected institutions by excessively strengthening the civil society. In addition, they had to cope with the task of rearranging cooperation with the civil society in the matter of state benefits, a task that was especially urgent and important as far as the reform of the all-inclusive state of the socialist past was concerned. Yet a great many governments and parliaments still maintain a critical attitude towards involving civil society players in policy formulation. Consequently, the formation and acceptance of an active civil society as the key to the successful consolidation of democracy still demands a great deal of attention.

Promoting civil society—a core task

The idea that a mature civil society contributes towards strengthening democracy is not in dispute. There are quite a number of cogent arguments to support it, of which only the most important will be mentioned below. In the liberal tradition, the existence of autonomous societal space is necessary to control the state. According to the theory of pluralism, civil society organisations in their diversity contribute towards safeguarding democracy through their conflict avoidance and recruitment potential. Civil-society associations may be seen as schools of democracy where civic virtues such as tolerance, acceptance, willingness to compromise, mutual trust and dependability can be learned in day-to-day dealings.

As a German political foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung) is in a position to contribute in many ways towards the creation of active civil societies in post-communist states. In this, it is guided by the Christian image of the person. To a Christian, promoting democracy is a question of solidarity and subsidiarity. Our aim is to offer the people living in our host and partner countries an opportunity to live a self-determined life in freedom, political and societal equality, and legal security.

Political foundations are a specifically German phenomenon. They play a unique part in the global promotion and shaping of democracy. In our partner countries, political elites

play a major part inasmuch as they have to accept and pursue a policy of reform that aims to develop the active participation of the civil society. All an external agency can do is complement, support and motivate processes of democratic transformation. In this context, the situation of political foundations is advantageous. Thanks to their clear-cut political orientation and their powerful and permanent presence in their partner countries, it is easier for them to build close relations marked by mutual trust. This gives them access to elites and leaders in politics, society, the economy, science, the media and religious organisations. Like other non-governmental players, foundations may extend their activities to fields that are off limits to governments. As far as programme depth, confidence building and sustainability are concerned, their most distinctive characteristic is the breadth of the tools that are available to them: combining practical experience on the spot with academic analyses, their consultation resources and projects may result in the flexible promotion of programmes that are targeted and in harmony with the context.

Promoting non-governmental organisations

The key task of all political foundations is to provide political education both in Germany and abroad, where they concentrate on countries that are transforming into democracies. Political education activities in Germany aim to embed the fundamental political values of the Federal Republic in its society. After Germany's reunification, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation set up a second political education centre in the new States. Forty years of communist dictatorship preceded by another 12 years of National Socialism have left their traces behind. This is why the activities of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in these new States revolve around communicating the fundamental values of democracy and strengthening the acceptance of democracy and competency in practising it, through the recognition of democratic rules and principles.

As it is the policy of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to cooperate with local partners in its international activities, it supports societal groups and non-governmental organisations in many ways. Local organisations are strengthened not only by improving infrastructure, communicating knowledge and providing assistance in concrete projects, but also—and very effectively—by setting up networks among the groups and providing legal assistance in the establishment of new organisations. When choosing its partner organisations, the Foundation concentrates on cooperating with players that advance democracy and come close to Christian democracy in their fundamental values and goals. Because freedom of opinion and the press is one of the standards for measuring the democratic development of a state, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation pays particular attention to promoting journalistic independence and value orientation. Programmes of socio-political dialogue furnish yet another contribution towards strengthening civil society structures: dialogue meetings between non-governmental organisations and representatives of political parties lend a voice to the demands of civil society. There are many cases in which a constructive dialogue on important practical subjects has been initiated by such meetings between governmental players, parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations.

The above-mentioned structural particularities of the post-socialist states suggest that merely providing direct support to non-governmental organisations is not enough to promote civil society engagement. Rather, supplementary action is required to strengthen public confidence in the meaningfulness of civil society engagement and political participation.

Providing support in confronting the past

Remembering the past plays an important role in the success of a political culture. This explains why dealing with the past is one of the traditional fields of activity of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation: a democracy is both dedicated to and dependent on the democratic virtues of frankness, trust, individuality and solidarity in its citizens. According to Bernhard Schlink, a well-known German professor of constitutional law, a democracy that supplants a dictatorship jeopardises its credibility and will certainly lose it in the eyes of the dictatorship's victims if it fails to bring the culprits to account and take legal steps to keep them from retaining their positions and pursuing their careers further [7, p. 103]. Thus, one of the prime purposes of lustration is to confirm civic virtues preventively and strengthen democracy.

In the post-communist countries, efforts to cope with the past are inseparable from their respective national context. Regional, political, and generational differences extend right across each society, marking the national discourse. After 1989, governments were unable to agree on how to deal with the communist system of lawlessness and its perpetrators in moral, legal and political terms. While some called for a radical treatment, a settling of accounts with high-ranking functionaries, others were anxious to distinguish themselves from the communist rulers in the manner in which they addressed the past.

In Germany, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation has assisted efforts to address the lawlessness of the GDR regime in various ways. It supported the commission of enquiry instituted by the Federal Parliament to address the history and to cope with the aftermath of the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) regime by providing access to historical documents and scientific studies as well as by consultation. In the socio-political field, moreover, the Foundation has consistently campaigned for overcoming and against idealising the SED past. Based on this experience, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation has addressed itself to the task of promoting a public discourse on totalitarian ideas and structures in those countries where the efforts of dealing with the communist heritage are still in their infancy, thus contributing to the creation of a culture of remembrance.

Strengthening political parties in their organisations, programmes and strategies

Citizens may justifiably expect their elected parliamentary representatives to be credible models of democratic maturity and civic virtue. If they are not, the citizens will be disappointed, and rightly so. Counselling and supporting political decision-makers may contribute much towards strengthening civil society engagement and political participation in the post-socialist states.

In a democratic system, political parties play a key role as mediators, for it is impossible to organise a democracy without democratic parties. Parties structure the 'voter market', they integrate and mobilise the electorate, and their programmes, precepts and solutions to problems as well as their (local) organisations afford a political 'home' to their members. Parties provide political leaders in government and in opposition. Without parties, democracy would either be a 'chaotic show' [8, p. 316], or else it would not be feasible. Parties are the precondition of political integration, which is why assisting parties in the development of their organisations, programmes and strategies constitutes a key element in the international cooperation work of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

In the field of party promotion, the Foundation follows a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it encourages the development of democratic multi-party systems, being

convinced that party diversity, freedom of choice and democratic competition among parties constitute the only foundation on which societal interests and problems can be adequately represented and citizens may actively participate in shaping their polity. On the other hand, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation is a political foundation that upholds the fundamental values of Christian democracy. It is our ambition to promote these fundamental values and goals in our partner organisations, including democracy, the rule of law, freedom, solidarity and justice.

In post-socialist Europe, most of the newly founded parties tend to have a weak electoral base and degree of organisation. This being so, the Foundation considers it particularly important to provide information about the significance of party-related groups with a common interest, such as youth, women's and professional associations, as links between the political parties and civil society. For the general public, the Foundation similarly develops political education programmes designed to create and stabilise the value orientation of the electorate. Another focus in party promotion is on motivating parties that belong to the same family to cooperate more closely on functional and thematic issues. Furthermore, some countries might find that Germany's experience with the establishment of an ecumenical people's party provides an interesting example.

Supporting churches in their societal role

Religion constitutes a fundamental asset in the culture of any society, and its influence on people's actions and attitudes is correspondingly strong. Religious orientations are also reflected in political positions and programmes, electoral decisions, or in the motivation to take an honorary office in civil society. This is where religion and politics intersect. Hannah Arendt, the German-American philosopher, once spoke of politics as 'applied charity'. While no politician would dare to put it like that, her statement is well worth thinking about. According to the Christian image of the person, human beings are God's own creatures. They are not the measure of all things. They may err, and they may become guilty. Nevertheless, they are called upon to shape the world with ethical responsibility. Thus, certain consequences arise from Christian doctrine that relate to our dealings with our fellow human beings and to our observance of the common interest in our conduct in politics.

In times of societal upheaval, people look to their church as a moral authority. As institutions that give meaning and guidance to people's lives, churches should be encouraged to perform their duties and communicate convictions. For the state can only set minimum standards—values must be taught by others. This is the particular mission of the churches and religious communities. In Germany, it proved an extremely positive experience for the Christian Democratic Union when, to hone its programme, it conducted a dialogue with the powerful social teachings of the churches. It was Franz-Josef Bode, the Catholic Archbishop of Osnabrück, who once pointed out, full of optimism, that the social ethic of the Protestant and the social dogma of the Catholic Church 'provide laws for building a society that will withstand any earthquake the future may bring'.

In the post-socialist states, it is our task to unearth the foundations that a policy based on Christian responsibility needs. Although the standing of churches and the importance of religions in these states may vary, we often find that there is a great deal of trust among the population, which might be utilised much more resolutely in shaping a

society. Yet the Orthodox churches are held to be more competent in private religious and moral matters than in social affairs. Therefore, ways and means must be found by which Christians may increase their contribution to the development of a political culture and the creation of a sound civil society. Towards this end, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation launched a programme entitled 'Socio-political Dialogue with Orthodoxy' already in the mid-1990s. At the time, the Foundation saw the Orthodox Church as a societal force with a great potential to create change. Today, we maintain regular cooperation with the Orthodox churches on forward-looking issues in societal policy and social ethics. At the same time, the Foundation supports innovative attempts to integrate social doctrine in the Orthodox divinity curriculum, besides cooperating intensely with young theologians to enhance the personnel available for the ecumenical dialogue in the long run.

Completing transformation—the goal

The idea of European integration was never confined to Western Europe, and the Polish Prime Minister, Leszek Miller, was quite right when he remarked on the day of the accession of his country to the European Union in May 2004, 'We are home again.' In communist times, the people living in the countries of east-central and southeast Europe emphatically insisted on belonging to Europe not only geographically but also intellectually and culturally. What happened in the shipyards of Gdansk clearly showed that the sense of belonging together had survived decades of isolation, proving itself robust enough to facilitate the unification of the continent in the end. Consequently, neither Poland nor the other countries of east-central Europe arrived in the European Union cap in hand. Having been forcefully and unwillingly kept from joining the Union, they had a right to become members.

There is no question that the prospect of joining the European Union provided as powerful an incentive to reform for the recently acceded countries of east-central Europe as it now does for the (potential) candidate States in the western Balkans. Therefore, the rapprochement between the post-communist countries and the European Union has acted as a positive catalyst. Yet the executive and technocratic features that characterise the processes of accession, stabilisation and association, as well as the European neighbourhood policy, imply a certain marginalisation that mainly affects civil society groups. Negotiations between bureaucracies do not necessarily lead to the establishment of shared values as a basis for new government structures [9, p. 1029]. Supplementary steps must be taken along different channels to induce the constitutive transformation of identities and preferences on which the sustainability of reforms depends.

The paradox that confronts the external players in the reform process is this: on the one hand, the emergence of a civil society is predicated on public spirit and civic participation, which—national differences notwithstanding—appear relatively weak in all post-socialist societies; on the other hand, intermediary entities may contribute a great deal towards strengthening civic participation and the public spirit. Depending on the availability of funds and the national political context, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, as a civil society institution having access to political decision-makers in its host and partner countries, believes itself to be in a position to make a crucial contribution towards overcoming this paradox and, consequently, towards completing the civil society transformation in the post-socialist countries of Europe.

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