Civil society, un-civil society and the social movements

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Abstract

This article discusses the experience of civil society and social movements in Central and Eastern Europe both before and after the events of 1989. It shows how the different paths to the development of "civil society" as an organising concept in the pre-1989 period impacted on experiences after that date, and relates this to broader theoretical debates on the concept. In particular, it argues that the movements of "un-civil society" often fulfil a more substantial political role than the NGOs of "civil society", for a range of reasons. The article draws on a series of interviews conducted with "alter-globalisation" activists in the region.

The social mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe has changed radically after the wave that took communism down in 1989. The question to be posed is what was the nature of that wave: was it preparing the ground for civil society in the region, or one should speak perhaps more of a social movement? Civil society is nowadays recognized as an important part of the democratic order filling the gap between the state, the market and the private, but social movements also claim this. What are the relations between these two? Do they have different functions or do they have to compete for supporters, popular recognition and resources? And is the civil society different in Central and Eastern European countries or does it follow similar patterns of development? If it is different, what are the most important factors for that: are they constituted within the concept of post-socialism, being on the one hand a result of historical bias from almost 50 years of communism; or rather a consequence of the rapid pace of political, social and economic transformation of 1989?

In order to take a deep insight into that question I would like to (1) first review the most popular concepts of civil society and (2) give a brief history of it in Central and Eastern Europe. I am especially interested in the way the former dissidents changed into the new elites and what were the consequences of it, especially for the people that went to activism. Subsequently (3) I will focus on the concept of the 'uncivil society', that is designed to explain the phenomena of political radicalism, violent groups and other outcasts of the political system, to see whether the social movements I am interested in fall into this category. For the empirical evidence for these reflections, I will use interviews with activists that might be included in the category of 'alter-globalist' activists, with whom I spoke about the position of the movement and activism in Central and Eastern European societies.

Despite the fact that these movements are outnumbered and marginalized, their presence in mainstream discourse is a good example of an idea given by Roland Barthes that was picked up by many anthropologists. By looking at the

'malfunctioning' parts and 'deviations' or phenomena that are on the fringe of the mainstream (society in this case) one can get more information about the majority. The situation looks a little bit like when a neuroscientist tries to explain the way the human brain functions, by pointing out possible disorders and malfunctionings of it. In other words, looking at radical social movements, their claims, their self-image and the way they position themselves in society, we can tell more about the processes within that society. And in our case, more about the quality of civil society itself. (4) Finally, many of my informants were very critical about civil society actors and about Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in particular, by looking at these arguments one can get a better perspective on the social movements themselves.

Introduction

When looking at the political and social life in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (particularly Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, which are my field of research), especially at activities that are not connected to the state, one can observe several specificities. Especially when looking at contentious politics and keeping in mind mass mobilizations that forced the communist regimes to hand over power in 1989, one can observe a significant decline in terms of numbers of people taking part in them. Also the activism of the less radical parts of the political scene seems to be a little bit less dense. My hypothesis is that civil society in the region is different to its Western counterparts in terms of numbers and structure. I claim that the reasons for that might be found in (1) the historical context and the specifics of the projects of civil society before 1989, and (2) in the short period of its development after the transformation.

Connections to the alter-globalist movement can be made at several levels: the movement sometimes claims Global Civil Society as its aim and the potential remedy for the injustices of this world, with actors from the movement and NGOs cooperating upon specific campaigns and events. Also, participation in both of them seems to be the domain of young people, so potential competition might take place, assuming limited resources (for example mobilization).

Definitions of civil society

The beginning of the modern understanding of the term 'civil society' comes from G.W.F. Hegel, who described the processes he observed among the development of the modern capitalist societies and the states. Hegel saw a differentiation between the state (central government) and civil society, which represents and promotes the interests of social classes and individuals and autonomous corporations, and in turn the social sphere of social institutions (like courts) – which regulates and takes care of society. For Hegel, civil society manifests contradictory forces. Being the realm of capitalist interests, there is the possibility of conflicts and inequalities within civil society, therefore, the

constant surveillance of the state is imperative to sustain the moral order in society. What is worth adding, is that for Hegel the state is also a moral organism, in fact the ideal one, therefore, the state should have the capacity to model the ethics of its citizens.

According to Marx, who concentrated on the economic sphere and the means of production, civil society was created by bourgeois society rather than creating it. For Marx, civil society was the 'base' where productive forces and social relations were taking place, whereas political society was the 'superstructure'. Agreeing with the link between capitalism and civil society introduced by Hegel, Marx held that the latter represents the interests of the bourgeoisie (Edwards 2004:10). Therefore, the state as superstructure also represents the interests of the dominant class; under capitalism it conserves the domination of the bourgeoisie and defends its gains, therefore is contradictory to the interests of the working class. Interestingly, this way of thinking is accepted by many of the activists in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) CEE, who told me, that the main reason for lower numbers of social activities is the lack of 'base'.

Reinterpreting Marx, Gramsci did not consider civil society as linked with the socio-economic base of the state. For Gramsci it was the "ethical content of the state" and he located it within the political superstructure. He stressed the crucial role of civil society as the contributor of the cultural and ideological capital for the survival of the hegemony of capitalism, and reproduced it through cultural terms (Żuk 2000:102-108). But for Gramsci civil society became also the arena where the struggle over hegemony takes place and where the societies can defend themselves against the market and the state. Gramsci's concept might have been inspirational to the leaders of the New Left, inspiring the ways of thinking that developed in Western countries and were also discussed in CEE countries, both by dissidents before 1989 and by the moderators of the changes after that date:

> *"The antithetical relationship between civil society and the state, central in the conception of Antonio Gramsci and so dominant in the writings of key East European dissidents (e.g. Havel, Konrad) is still very influential in both the writing on, and the beliefs of activists within civil society in post-communist Europe. In that, many contemporary CSOs do exactly the same as their historic predecessors: they distrust and oppose the state in general, and (party) political elites in particular"* (Mudde 2003:166).

Today's two-way understanding of the concept of civil society is closely linked to the emergence of the nongovernmental organizations and the new social movements (NSMs) in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. In the globalized world, civil society as a third sector - opposed to the state and the sphere of economic and business institutions. (Żuk 2000:114) It became a key terrain of strategic action to construct 'an alternative social and world order.' Because of that, postmodern usage of the idea of civil society became divided into two main paths: as a political society and as the third sector, more professionalized and politically neutral. Civil society in both areas is, however, often viewed in relation to the state, remaining a counterweight and complement rather than an

alternative. With the growing importance of neoliberalism, civil society understood as the 'third sphere' began to be seen as a solution to the desired shrinking of states and minimizing their social functions. Based on the principles of the Washington Consensus, social programs run by the states were cut because of inefficiency, leaving many people's needs to be met by other groups. This also had an impact on the definitions of the civil society, becoming broader and blurred at the same time, incorporating the actions of civil militia and sports clubs, and hobby groups and religious groups, and so forth.

The London School of Economics' 'Centre for Civil Society''s working definition is a good example:

> *"Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups[1]".*

As we can see, the range of the actors that might be included in that category is very wide, making it difficult to understand and cover. Acknowledging differences around the world, Linz and Stepan define civil society in broader terms as an *"arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests"* (Linz and Stepan 1996:7). What seems to be interesting is the inclusion of movements within the concept of the civil society. Moreover, other aspects of this definition call for more precision in the definition, especially the self-organization and the 'relative autonomy from the state'. For example, could the opening chapters of international NGOs (hence actors of the civil society) with their own organizational culture might still be called self-organization? Or the very active role of think-tanks and instructors from other countries that try to shape and build civil society, which was often the case in Central and Eastern European countries?

Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996), who distinguish between the 'arenas' of civil, political, and economic society, provide a good example of such conceptualization, which is nowadays widely used in democratization studies. Self-organized groups, movements and associations (civil society) may have a relationship with the state, but they do not aim to occupy it. The contest over the

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1   "What is civil society?". Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics. http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm; accessed 1.3.04

control of public power and the state apparatus is the imperative of political society (e.g. political parties)" (Kopecky 2003:8-9). The question is whether civil society should help and complete the state structures and help to develop the confidence ties between the state and society or whether its aim should be to control it. Putnam (1993) argues that CMOs: *"generate interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity that underpin the functioning of political institutions. The denser the web of such social networks between the people, the stronger the efficacy of institutions, and the better the democracy"* (Kopecky 2003:10). This argument also shows the potential subversive feature of civil society, either in the case of more authoritarian regimes but also within democratic systems. This threat might explain, why some groups than are labeled as uncivil society.

Most standard approaches regard civil society in the conventional way as the sphere occupying the space between the state and the family, or possibly also between the state, the family and the market, but according to Szacki (1997:59) there is a contradiction within the modern understanding of the civil society, who: *"on the one hand a kind of cult of spontaneous activity, not planned nor lead [...] on the other – acknowledgment of of individualism and plurality as values to be defended and secured by the law".* In many cases it is not what the civil society actors actually do but rather a question of what is being expected from their actions. In countries that went through democratic transitions, the potential of society building by civil actors is even bigger, since it is believed, that these actors (and their controlling functions) make the system more stable.

Robert D. Putnam argues that non-political organizations in civil society are vital for democracy and its sustainability. They are supposed to build social capital, trust and shared values, which are transferred into the political sphere and help to hold society together. Civil society actors, by involving many people in their actions play an informational role and also increase the trust in democracy (but not in politics) by creating a common *polis* (Putnam et al. 1994). Through political or non-political actions they create also a common space and responsibility for preserving it.

While acknowledging the processes of globalization, questions about its relations with civil society also emerge, especially as many of the actors cross the boundaries of national states. The call for a Global Civil Society is seen as the main claim of the more moderate actors of the globalization-critical movements, stressing their controlling function within the society and over states and markets and extending the range to the world level. As some critics say, the rapid development of civil society on a global scale after the fall of the communist system was a part of neoliberal strategies linked to the Washington consensus (Zaleski 2006). This might suggest that the growth of civil society is permanently linked to the neoliberal doctrine and is a crucial factor of it, especially when the nation states are weakened. With more funding coming from corporations and supranational bodies, such as the EU for example, a question is raised (often by activists) whether one might talk about other patterns for dependency.

The situation is even more complicated in countries where civil society (and other features of democratic institutions) are relatively new and the expectations are much bigger than in more stable regimes and where they are much more idealized. Therefore, to study the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe, Marek Skovajsa suggests that the classic definitions should be extended, with a division between 'core civil society' and 'broader civil society', if one wants to understand the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe.

Civil society in Central and Eastern Europe

The situation of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe nowadays is deeply rooted in the history of development of this concept in the region and the tensions between the actors already existing in communist societies (despite the Marxist notion of its role of preserving the unwanted social relations and defending the privileges of the middle class). Many people were members of sports clubs, trade unions, environmental groups (although these were different to the groups that are known today: their function was more educational than an actual fight with the authorities over environmental policies), and religious groups. Their actions, or to be more specific, their elites that decided over their actions, were controlled by the communist parties in the region and did not pose any threat to the system itself.

Therefore, the call for the autonomy of civil society was in fact the call for freedom and the creation of parallel and independent structures as a means to achieve it. As one of the leaders of the democratic opposition in Poland, Bronisław Geremek said, *"the idea of a civil society – even one that avoids overtly political activities in favor of education, the exchange of information and opinion, or the protection of the basic interests of the particular groups – has enormous anti-totalitarian potential"* (1992:4). Everything that the authoritarian regime cannot control, in the public sphere (and to some extent in the private one) was a threat for the authorities. The politicized concept of the building of civil society in communist countries, already existing actors (such as cultural and sports associations, trade unions legitimized by the system and so forth) were not seen as potential partners, because of their dependency. As Skovajsa argues: *"In countries with particularly repressive and stable post-totalitarian regimes, the dissident conceptions were characterized by deep distrust toward the state and the state-dominated civil society structures"* (Skovajsa 2008:53). Therefore, the parallel society that most of the concepts have argued for, had to be independent from the state in every possible way: structurally, in terms of power distribution, and financially. Besides political claims, in particular the fight with the communist regime, one of the aims of the project of civil society was to re-establish the *"authentic social ties that had been damaged by communist social engineering"* (Kopecky 2003:4).

This concept might be described by a metaphor that was in use during communism and that was referring to the publishing of books and magazines.

During communist times a phenomenon of the 'second cycle' was created and it was referring to publishing cycles, with the first one – the official, and the second organized by the dissidents. This corresponded with the idea of building 'alternative' or 'parallel' societies within the communist regime as on the one hand the foundations for future civil society and on the other as for creation of the base for protest movements. Marek Skovajsa writes: *"The strategy of the 'new evolutionism', propounded by Adam Michnik in his famous 1976 essay, aimed at fostering and developing a parallel society independent of the state, and at first sight did not look too different from Benda's proposal[2]. The crucial difference was, however, that while the Czech dissidents regarded the expansion of antiregime activism into a society-wide phenomenon as little more than a utopian hope, Michnik foresaw the constitution of a mass and nonelitist parallel social structure"* (Skovajsa 2008:54-55). Since most of the influential dissidents were part of the *intelligentsia*, most of the energy was devoted to publishing books that would otherwise be stopped by the censorship committees, leaving the development of the parallel food supply system to more spontaneous actions of the rest of society.

The institutional foundations of the civil society project in Poland, for example, were the Solidarność trade union and the Catholic Church - institutions, whose participation in the civil society is widely discussed until today. The call for autonomy of the civic activities was, in the environment of the authoritarian regime, a call for freedom. This call still influences the debate over civil society in Poland, which is understood as activities oriented on the realization of the common good, not as protecting the interests of one's own group. This assumption is important since many of the actions taken in public are either politicized, involved in economic struggle or refer to the interests of a group - although with the growing economic dependence of NGOs and other actors, the boundaries that can be drawn between these lines becomes a difficult task. Also in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, civil society constructed by the dissidents was *de facto* an anti-regime project trying to involve the mass society within the struggle. In all of the countries of the region, civil society was an anti-regime and as a result, anti-state activity, the kind of which was definitely unwanted after the regime change.

The Hungarian case might be located between Poland and Czechoslovakia, with a significant withdrawal to the private sphere and a stress on the moral aspects of surviving within the communist regime. The antipolitics of Gyorgy Konrád relied on mass involvement on a relatively non-political level, more as a form of the social self-management than the foundation of a mass social movement. As Skovajsa summarizes what the project was about: *"decent survival in a communist society is best possible by making conscious effort to preserve one's moral integrity in everyday life and to lead a fulfilling life where only it is*

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2   Benda called for the creation of various parallel structures, such as a parallel culture, economy, system of education, information network, or political activities that would fulfill those vital social functions the official structures were unable to satisfy. (Skovajsa 2008:53).

possible, that is, in the intimate circle of members of the family and close friends" (Skovajsa 2008:55).

This withdrawal to the private sphere (as much as it is possible to define and to draw the boundaries) resulted in a relatively low level of social mobilization and definitely the lack of history of it. In fact, one of the biggest social mobilizations in Hungary during the communist times was the 'Danube Circle' – an environmental campaign against the project of building dams on the Danube river, which brought together activists from Hungary and Czechoslovakia. There were problems with mobilization ('mobilization fatigue') after the changes in 1989. The "Danube Circle" and its counterpart in Slovakia were working against the plans of a hydro power plant meant to be built on the bordering river of the Danube since 1977 – one of the outcomes was the openness of the negotiations and a public debate about the whole project (for more see Pickvance and Luca 2001:105-108). This was not only a transnational campaign (and a successful one to some extent) but it was also inspired by ideas that came from western Europe, of environmental protection understood as a conflict and criticism of state policies. It was also – in a way – an attempt to redefine the policies of development. After the transformation of the regime this social capital might have resulted in the central role and dominating position of environmentalist groups in present-day Hungary on the stage of social activism and of the broad range of the claims raised by these groups (not solely limited to environmental protection but also involving human rights and social problems).

In Czechoslovakia, the civil society project was initiated by a poet who later became the president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, by Vaclav Havel. The project was morally based and at the same time pretty mystical, with a universal claim for withdrawal from the political of the regime and rejection of collaboration with it. This was the universal foundation for all projects of this kind within the region, as Petr Kopecky, in the opening chapter to the 'Uncivil Society? Contentious politics in post-communist Europe*' says: *"The crucial element of this conception of civil society [in CEE] was the critique of state power. The experience of suppression and underlying anti-totalitarian tendencies led many dissidents to the conclusion that East European states were to a large extent defined by their hostility towards organizations outside state control"* (Kopecky 2003:3).

But at the same time Havel remained realistic; it was a distinctive feature of the Prague spring, that, in contrast with Hungary in 1956 and of Poland in the 70s and 80s, Czechoslovak society didn't want to restore capitalism, but accepted socialism, in an appropriately reformed (and Moscow-independent) form. Only a few went beyond the dogma of the managerial role of the communist party. Havel, in an article published on 4 April 1968 in the Literárni Listy magazine, rejected the conception of the opposition as partnership. 'Charter 77' activist Václav Benda, raising his concern that the Charter's grounding in an overly abstract project which might be too complicated and sophisticated to be accepted by the masses, suggested that the dissidents should create a "parallel polis" in order to form the base and capacity to overthrow the regime.

Benda called for the creation of various parallel structures, such as *"a parallel culture, economy, system of education, information network, or political activities that would fulfill those vital social functions the official structures were unable to satisfy"* (Skovajsa 2008:53). Nevertheless, as Skovajsa continues: *"The Czech dissident political theorizing trusted much more the independent civil society, composed of small dissident enclaves, to which all the theorists belonged, than the broader civil society that extended too far into the semiofficial and official sphere. Poland was the country in East-Central Europe that represented the most extreme opposite to Czechoslovakia. Poland saw the emergence of a strong and successful antiregime mass movement and a critical weakening of the communist state as early as 1980"* (Skovajsa 2008:54).

The concept of civil society was composed of intellectuals who were on the one hand elitist and exclusionary, and on the other hand, seemed to be treating it as the vanguard of the desired political change. The small scale and elitism of the Czechoslovak dissidents movement is outlined by Skovajsa: in Czechoslovakia, the yearly numbers of new signatories to the Charter 77 declaration in the 1980s remained below fifty, with a slight increase at the end of the decade[3]. (Skovajsa 2008:67-8).

This situation was potentially 'softened' by the case of the 'Plastic People of the Universe', a rock band, who faced a trial related to the lyrics of one of their songs and who were in fact repressed by the regime almost since their foundation in 1969. As a sign of solidarity, an open letter was written and signed by many of the people involved in Charter 77, the main oppositional organization. However, the whole process seemed to have been done behind the backs of, and with little participation of the group itself, and therefore were perceived by some as lacking credibility (for more, see Johnston 2009:17). As a result, the dissidents were evolving in their own sphere, so had the more counterculturally–based underground. One of my informants from the Czech Republic summarized this situation as following:

> *"- In Czechoslovakia the dissident movement wasn't so big (as it was in Poland) and so radical, although it was very influential, right?*
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> *- It was some kind of intellectual and economical and professional elite, but there was also the underground. Based on music and culture, and there were many people in the underground and they worked on different principles than the dissidents.*
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> *- So, these two were not connected?*
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> *- Not very much, because there were some problems between those two groups, because the dissidents were like intellectuals, very academic people and thinkers and the underground was like normal people or the people who reject socialism based on socialist principles. And sometimes*

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3   The numbers were under 30 per year in the mid-1980s, 108 in 1988, and 442 in 1989 (source: Libri Prohibiti Archive, Prague).

they were drinking too much, you know, a different culture, long hair, dirty clothes, and you see a dissident was with an intellectual with nice clothes with different words...."[4]

The 'third cycle' – youth between the communist party and the dissidents.

From the mid 1980s, with the growing popularity of subcultural-based movements (such as punk or concepts of deep ecology) and the lack of interest in them from the dissidents, a 'third cycle' was created, consisting mostly of zines, brochures and pamphlets, but attracting lots of attention from young people. It is worth noticing that subcultures in Poland under communism were much more politicized than in western countries and belonging to one was not only a lifestyle choice, but also a political statement. Starting from the 1950s, communist authorities were heavily suspicious of subculture, anything that was alternative or even fashion trends (especially in the beginning) – anything that they could not control. Many music groups had politicized lyrics, usually hidden under metaphors and events such as the punk festival in Jarocin, that took place for the first time in 1984, became icons of the youth movement and still remain as such for many activists (even those who are too young to be there and remember it). This split between the more and more professionalized dissidents and the creative youth grew stronger, as more the Solidarność movement was leaning towards liberal or neoliberal positions (for more see Ost 2005). This situation was portrayed by one of my informants, who said:

"environmental issues, antimilitarist, whatever from this flank, a break away from this national independence rhetoric, from martyrdom, from Katyń[5], from Siberia, and here such a fresh way of looking at it. It this way it was never done.... The majority of people were definitely passive, a myth of strikes attesting to it in 1988, which were supposed to lead to the round table, it is a myth, there were almost no strikes generally speaking, now sometimes it is possible to read something about it. There was an article a few days ago in Gazeta Wyborcza, that these strikes, these were no real strikes, these weren't mass protests, it was mounting gates in work places by young workers, strengthened by activists from WiP, or anarchists or youth nationalist organizations.[6]"

One of the binding features of the Solidarność movement and the main frame used by it was the fight for national independence and the link with traditional values connected to the Catholic Church. Public declarations of faith, the use of

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4   Interview 3.

5   Katyń is a Russian city where in 1941 Soviet soldiers executed several thousands of Polish POW: officers, policemen, teachers and people working for the administration. Denied for many years, Katyń became a symbol of the fight for historic truth about communism and was used by the dissidents, especially after nationalist-liberation frames started being used.

6   Interview 11

nationalist rhetoric and at the same time growing conservatism of the dissidents made participation unattractive for young people, especially for those with links to new emerging subcultures and inspired by lifestyle activisms from western Europe. One of the most well known groups from these days was the 'Orange Alternative' – 'Pomarańczowa Alternatywa' (PA). It is said that the name Orange Alternative arrives from Orange being in the middle of colors representing two major political powers in Poland (until this very day) – the Red for the Communist or left, and the Yellow for the Church and the right[7]" – this programme manifesto located the group between the two main actors of the political scene in the late 1980s and is significant for many groups of such a nature. The dissidents became more professionalized and eventually the new elites after 1989 while the communists first represented the oppressive regime and were later labeled as not having substantially changed (mainly because of the involvement of former elite members). This left many groups and individuals stranded on the political scene, with two possible ways of change: going to less politicized NGOs, or getting involved in anti-systemic social movements, often closely linked to subcultures.

After the transformation

The first attempts to create a civil society in the region after the transformation of 1989 were of a top-down nature. Many western NGOs and foundations tried to implement the "third sector" to make democracy in the region a full one. Before that "*Poland allowed an excellent example of an authoritarian regime that allowed for 'negative freedom', i.e. a (certain level of) freedom from repression of dissent (see Ekiert and Kubik 1999; Zuzowski 1993). Hungary had an even less repressive Communist regime, as the 'Alliance Policy' of the Kadar regime also allowed for a level of 'positive freedom', i.e. the freedom to organize associational life outside the communist structures – as long as it was not explicitly anti-communist (see Seleny 1999)*" (Mudde 2003:162). Other authors take into account the fact that NGOs began to be legalized (in Poland and Hungary) in the mid 1980s, but the whole process gained its dynamics after the changes in 1989. There was also the fear that the newly introduced democracy was not a stable system and that the lack of ways to manage potential disruptive tendencies within the society might be a threat to the system itself. Democratic procedures, such as independent central banks, a judiciary system, free elections and so forth, were not enough to prevent the new democracies from falling into other forms of authoritarianism or getting caught by the spiral of nationalism (the example of the Yugoslavia shows, these fears were not necessarily lacking foundations).

One of the biggest promoters of such solutions was a multi-millionaire George Soros, a very controversial figure, described by Naomi Klein as: "*As the world's*

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[7]
    http://www.pomaranczowa_alternatywa.republika.pl/orange%20alternative%20overvi ew.html

most powerful currency trader, he stood to benefit greatly when countries implemented convertible currencies and lifted capital controls, and when state companies were put on the auction block, he was one of the potential buyers" (Klein 2007:236). Many of my informants (especially from Hungary) accused him of creating civil society artificially, mostly to channel the anger and rebellious tendencies among young people. The actors of this kind of civil society were supposed to be a 'safety valve' for the system because of their dependency on financial resources (mainly states, supra-national institutions such as the EU and big businesses).

Claus Offe (1992:26 - 32) suggested that in Central and Eastern Europe, there might be difficulties in creating civil society, mostly because of lacking solid democratic institutions embedded within the society. To him, most of the social groups active in the region are counter – institutional and anti – political, or at least that is their legacy. But as we look at the study of Jan Kubik and Grzegorz Ekiert (Kubik and Ekiert 1999), we can see, that confrontational actions (mainly strikes and road blockades) were the most visible ones, not the 'quiet' work done by NGOs. Because there is nothing these might call back at in structural terms, they are at risk of steaming off their mobilization powers, because they lack negotiational tactics and skills that lead to gaining in political influence (see also Żuk 2000:150). The know-how had to come from the outside, shaping the relation between the actors from the start, not allowing them to evolve in dialogical process, but there is also a hidden presumption that civil society in the new democratic countries should play a supplementary role to the state and resign from the dichotomous 'us' vs. 'them' division.

The decline in civic activism in Central and Eastern Europe, is also explained in terms of the retreat into the private sphere, being a result of the disappointment and disillusion with the new elites. As Kubik writes: *"Many people during such unstable periods tend to retreat into their private or parochial worlds. It is well established that 'the pattern of retreat into parochial institutions ... is a characteristic response for many people when faced with a larger society that is culturally unfamiliar' (Wilson 1991:213)"* (Kubik 2000:112). Firstly, in post-communist Poland there was no situation of facing a 'larger society that is culturally unfamiliar', in fact, the new cultural models that were propagated were introduced by the elites, but any cultural resistance was outnumbered (for example the feminist movement, groups with countercultural background and so on) and has not played an important role. And from today's perspective, looking at the materials collected during those times, the response was not retreating to the private sphere. Secondly, the retreat from the public sphere had rather economic foundations, since one of the biggest changes in peoples' lives was the end of the feeling of security, at least in social terms that was combined with the ethos of success and hard work. The everyday battle for survival (for some) or for more goods and better positions (for others) left no time and energy required for social activism and involvement into politics.

What is interesting in Kubik's analysis of the changes in Poland after 1989 is the classification of the elites' political culture (Kubik 2000:114-117), dividing the

scene between 'revolutionaries' and 'reformists' – a division that was created upon the Solidarity elites due to their position upon the 'settlements' with the former regime. Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki suggested a very controversial concept of the 'thin line' that should be drawn between the communist past and the present, without pressing legal and moral charges against the members of the former regime. This resulted in a major breakdown of the Solidarity camp and in the end led – among other reasons - the social democratic party (that transformed from the communist party) to power in the elections of 1993. Without going too deep into the debate, the classification of the frames seems to be interesting for this research, since similar ones seem to be used when approaching alternative activities, together with the alter-globalist movement. These conceptualizations are: revolutionaries are extreme (often with comparisons with the communist regime); they are populist (therefore are a threat to the young democracy and delay its consolidation); they are unsophisticated (not only at the level of argumentation they use, this accusation was extended also to their image and even personal hygiene); and they are evil (in the sense they do not want what is good for others, they might also have 'evil' intentions or even 'evil' eyes). Those conceptualizations that go the other way seem to be more context-dependent and therefore are not useful for my research.

The difference between other transitional countries (such as for example post-Soviet states) and those in Central and Eastern Europe was the lack of democratic dissidents and intellectuals resulted in the lack of any ideas of how the civil society should look like after the change of the regime. Of course not all CEE countries looked the same in this matter. For example some people claim that in Hungary the opposition had to be created by the communists, so they could negotiate the shift of the power with someone[8], but the situation was different. In post-Soviet states the civil society had no intellectual backgrounds among local elites; therefore it had to be implemented directly from Western countries without applying the concepts to local standards and cultural context, therefore it was regarded as something alien and not meeting local needs.

This top-down process (also in terms of the top meaning external – Western – powers) was based on the transfer of know-how and of course finances: *"In post-communist Europe, where Western states and private foundations have invested billions of dollars in both the building of (domestic) civil societies and the using of NGOs to develop and implement international aid programs, following similar practices in Africa and Latin America"* (Mudde 2003:158). In post-Soviet countries the whole process was much clearly visible, and as Ruth Mandel writes (referring to her fieldwork in Central Asia): *"For the most part, the model was taken from the USA and Western Europe, with their proliferation of grassroots groups and clubs, environmental activists and an unregulated media"* (Mandel 2002:283). Because of this direct transfer of organizing structures without respecting the local context and without

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8   This claim was presented in a documentary movie System 09 produced by TV Polska (Polish public broadcaster) and shown on TVP2 on February 5th 2009.

'translating' it into the local environment, these models failed and had to be replaced with more appropriate forms. In CEE countries, with some dissident traditions and a developed pro-democratic movement (consisting of various groups such as human and womens' rights activists, environmentalists and so forth) the situation was not as obvious, but still the general impression and constrains of implementing the ideal of civil society seems to be similar. Nevertheless, participation in NGOs became more and more popular as the system went more and more stable, involving many young people with activist, countercultural and dissident backgrounds within. As one of my informants said about the development of this phenomenon:

> *[the late 1980s] were a time of naivety, there is no point in fooling oneself. All this defiance [against the communists] that was strong at the end of 1980s, the contestation, got caught into the myth of non-governmental organizations. The NGOs dismantled this remarkable, revolutionary energy, energy which went inside people's heads [...] and people accepted without doubts this propaganda from Gazeta Wyborcza [a central-left daily newspaper, one of the biggest in Poland, founded by former dissident Adam Michnik], that in 1989 it is already after the revolution and they are supposed to find themselves somehow in this reality. And that is why many people went to NGOs.*

The concept of the 'uncivil' society.

The main definition of uncivil society is based on the use – or on the will to use – violence, although speaking to activists who were involved in the black block actions (or any other confrontational practices), the definition of the use of violence is much more complex than among the rest of the society (the questions of violence against public property, private property, self-defense and so forth). Laurence Whitehead (1997) defines 'uncivil society' by (1) the lack of commitment to act within the constrains of legal or pre-established rules, and (2) the lack of spirit of civicity, the 'civic responsibilities' or 'civic mindedness'. Kopecky and Mudde (2003) came up with a conceptualization of the term uncivil society and applied it to several countries in Eastern Europe, claiming that the rise of some antidemocratic movements and tendencies in the area is a result of lack of civil society (that had not enough time to emerge) and the tradition of anti-governmental struggles since during the communist era, the division between 'us' and 'them' was very clear. This was, because: "*first, civil society was almost completely framed as an antithesis to the (totalitarian) state [...]. Second, it was a monolithic conception, which stressed the unity of opposition of 'us' ('the people') against 'them' ('the corrupt elite')*" (Kopecky 2003:5). As a result some of the groups became regarded as anti-state and antidemocratic because of their lack of compromising skills and will, and

organizations cooperating with the state (as in Western countries) were less likely to raise.

The rise of 'un-civil' groups and antidemocratic tendencies in the politics of the Central and Eastern European countries was not only a result of the economic changes. It is also connected to the changes in political representation of some groups – especially workers, which are the biggest class in these societies. The workers' movement in Poland, for example, was the foundation for the "Solidarność" trade union that started the democratic changes in the region in 1980. According to David Ost (2005) the main problem with its elites was that they decided not to stand in the name of the workers (economic claims were only a small part of the program of the union, most of their claims were of a political nature, like for example the freedom of speech, getting rid of the censorship). Throughout all the 1980s the elites of the Solidarność movement had been trying to get rid of the workers, who in fact brought them to success and after 1989 – to power. The main argument was that one cannot build a civil society based upon the workers' class, because the workers themselves are 'unpredictable, uncontrollable, irrational, unwilling to accept compromises and not able to accept the boundaries of reality'. This criticism shows, that the elites were afraid of the workers' anger and in fact the whole shift and the criticism signifies a neoliberal shift of the post-communist Poland (and other countries) and in the end the workers lost their political representation.

In general, trade unions, as part of civil society, were constantly losing members because of their former ties to the communist party and (in the Polish case) because of the close connections to the new elites and political parties, that lost credibility themselves. Moreover, there is an ongoing tendency for the workers' movement to lose its definition as a 'class-for-itself' and with growing precarity on the job market, the workers' ethos is in decline. Recently some of the radical trade unions started to raise the questions of the job market and the security networks together with the alter-globalist movement, either in cooperation with it (such as in the case of the protest in Ożarów in Poland, when the blockade of the liquidated cable factory mobilized around 200 anarchists and other activists) or in the formation of joint political groups (such as the 'Inicjatywa Pracownicza – Workers Initiative', a syndicalist trade union in Poland; attempts to form similar groups can be seen around the whole region).

The emergence of the 'un-civil' movement might be linked to the main idea behind Ost's book: policing of anger by political parties. Since most of the mainstream parties were trying to avoid any tensions based on the re-distribution of wealth, they were trying to find a replacement enemy that would distract the attention of the frustrated classes. The politics of anger: in authoritarian regimes, the anger focuses on the Party (leaders) who possess all means of production and control over the society. In capitalism the division is not that clear, so the management of anger is far more complicated for both sides – for the movement (problems with mobilization and collecting resources) and for the government, since it is much more difficult to control it and anger might be used by competitive political forces as a means for political struggle.

The main focus is on the emotions – especially anger – created by capitalism and the scope of political parties is to manage those emotions – either by meeting the needs of the voters (workers mainly in this case) or by giving some kind of replacement, like immigrants, abortion or other substitutionary topics. This also created a situation where all class-based and economic-oriented protests were labeled as 'irrational', 'irresponsible' and not worth mentioning or discussing; a similar situation occurred with radical ecological protests or other youth based resistance, which was immediately linked to youth subcultures and therefore made banal.

Civil society vs. social movements (from the social movements' perspective)

During my fieldwork with activists from groups that might be classified as belonging to the alter-globalist movement, the question of civil society emerged many times - not only the theoretical concept of it and the position of the movement within this frame, but also the cooperation with other actors of the scene, especially NGOs. These talks revealed many tensions among the anti-hierarchical groups and the more organized actors, and based on these talks this list of accusations to the NGOs and more 'professionalized' groups emerged:

They become a working place for the people so the spirit of the 'true activist' is being lost. One of my informants from the Czech Republic said, that: *"[when can one define itself as a 'true' activist] it also depends on your lifestyle and I don't think I live according to anarchist principles. It's connected to being active in everyday life, not only anti-capitalist but also anti hierarchic and I work for a NGO and I support through this NGO this system. I work... I'm a leader of this organization, and that doesn't fit my conception of anarchism"*[9]. This corresponds with the observation of Cas Mudde, who says: *"Most NGOs in post-communist Europe are cadre organizations with no grassroots support whatsoever. Their members are generally full-time employees, for whom their work is a job rather than a calling. In sharp contrast, many of the 'uncivil' movements do represent and involve parts of society, though in a more fluid and ad hoc manner"* (Mudde 2003:167).

For some people in the NGOs (especially those collaborating voluntarily) the reason for the actions is not political (even in the postmodern meaning, where even "the personal is political"). For many of them it is just an attempt to find a way in their lives and it's not a 'true involvement' simply because they are looking for ways to live their lives.

The groups are becoming more professionalized so they become detached from the cultural milieu of the movement, from its 'roots'. The activists are becoming more serious (for example they dress up more smartly) which corresponds with the first point. That would suggest that the alter-globalist movement is strongly connected to the counterculture, although many informants claim not to be. My

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9   Interface 2

respondents told me, that either (a) they joined the movement through punk rock (hardcore was mentioned occasionally) as the early stage of their involvement or (b) stressed that their way was unusual because they DID NOT entered the movement through the music subculture, the dependency on resources offered by authorities or big businesses – not only financial, but also offices and other places. That limits the repertoire of contention that might be used and makes these groups more moderate and detached from direct action principles. Fund raising is seen as a method to control these groups by the 'system' – big business (especially as represented by George Soros, who has a clear and precisely defined vision of the post-totalitarian society) and states. But some members and leaders of NGOs say that this image is oversimplified:

> *"for me it is a bit funny, because from the start world revolutionary movements drew money from different dubious sources, and I think that making a start in a grant competition or releasing a record, isn't less ethical than attacking the bank or organizing an illegal concert. I don't also see any alternative option here for getting funds, especially for stationary action [...] of course becoming independent from grants is our dream, it is no secret, however at the moment we don't have such an option, it is a regrettable necessity, it is a huge bureaucratic task"[10].*

This seems to be a particular problem for anarchist-based groups (or those who claim to have 'anarchist strains', as one of my Hungarian respondents said), but people from NGOs also said that it prevents them from posing more political issues or projects. This can be seen in one of the conversations I had with an NGO leader:

> *"- I heard, that the fact that people are becoming involved in NGOs they aren't becoming involved in more radical actions?*
>
> *- Well, that this way rather than differently it is blurring the fact that people are becoming involved in radicalism. I agree with it to some extent, but it is also an issue of a way. We assume, that in Poland only there is a time for construction of the base for a grassroots movement, therefore action that strictly is political unnecessary and premature. [...] And also radical action... Don't know how you understand it?*
>
> *- More direct actions, painting passwords on walls, squatting of buildings, different kind of blockades...*
>
> *- Officially and this way nobody will admit to it to you, to squatting, for example to the policeman, or something.*
>
> *- But people are claiming these actions with names of their groups.*
>
> *- They can allow themselves to do it, because they aren't legal entities [...]"[11]*

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10   Interview 12

11   Interview LS

NGOs and similar organizations become a 'security valve' for the system, because they are channeling potentially dangerous and subversive energy of (dominantly) young people into less political campaigns and problems: *"there is a great discussion, whether NGOs are more a safety valve for the system or a method of the fight against it. I assume that it's like with the rifle which can be used to a lot of ways, perhaps to be given to the policeman who will shoot at workers, or it can be given to workers' militia forces to defend against it. The same with NGOs"*[12]. But later my respondent admitted that the groups he is active in are rather an exception than a rule. By attracting these groups or individuals they are not taken over by more radical social movements and don't become political. It seems that there is a competition between the groups over the newcomers, who might be potential participants of the groups.

By getting involved in local problems they miss the background of it, for example by turning the energy to save a park or a national reserve, they don't see the neoliberal ideology that and its logic that led to such investment or forming a program that deals with the Roma children and provides them equal educational opportunities, the logic of identity-based exclusion and oppressive politics are neglected. Some groups try to adopt this broader perspective, saying that:

> *"it is a foundation, it is necessary to explain to the people the facts of life, that things are connected with themselves, that human rights in Tibet are inseparably connected with the situation of the dollar on foreign exchange markets, with the global ecological crash, with the situation in Poland; it is a system of connected issues. Without that one will never enter other than the ethnocentric perspective: nothing beyond what is happening in their work place, in their small country, with their gender, with their sexual orientation"*[13].

But the issue here is again the question of the politicization of the claims, not only in reference to the world or national economy (for which the politicians are mostly responsible) but also in terms of moral context, for example when addressing the politics of the Law and Justice party which was in power in Poland in the years 2004-2007, with its president Lech Kaczyński, a former mayor of Warsaw, who blocked an 'equality march' (later labeled by the media as 'gay parade'). His actions were described by Naomi Klein as following: *"Poland is now ruled by President Lech Kaczyński, a disaffected Solidarity activist who, when he was the mayor of Warsaw, made a name for himself by banning a gay-pride-day march and participating in a "normal people pride"* event (This prejudice is not unique for Poland. In March 2007, London's mayor, Ken Livingstone, warned of a dangerous 'gale of reaction against lesbian and gay rights blowing across eastern Europe')" (Klein 2007:449). The issues of sexual orientation became therefore political statements not only in the moral context but also in regard to freedom of speech and the struggle over the aim of politics.

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12   Interview

13   Interview

The whole discussion between NGOs (seen as the representatives of civil society) and social movements seems to revolve around two main questions of definition: who is an activist and what is a social movement? What kind of actions in public are movement actions and what counts as civil activism? And what is 'real' activism? Out of many debates, the notion of being 'real' seems coming back again and again like a boomerang, the orthodoxy of the movement seems to increase with its radicalism and to what extent the ideology matters: the issue of being a 'true one' is much more important for anarchists or Trotskyests than for ATTAC or Greenpeace members. The first ones are more related to their ideology, than to the aim of the organization, whether it is preserving nature or the introduction of the Tobin Tax. Of course, being a 'true' activist and being devoted to the movement does not reflect the position of the 19th Century revolutionists, who were supposed to be, at least in Sergiey's Niechayev's pamphlet: *"The revolutionary is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no affairs, no sentiments, attachments, property, not even a name of his own. Everything in him is absorbed by one exclusive interest, one thought, one passion – the revolution[14]"*. But for today's activists being honest with oneself also in terms of lifestyle and everyday decisions is important, as one of the group leaders I spoke to said:

> *"It is only an question of the lack of engagement of the people in the movement, if these people at least only filled the issue up with the minimum effort, namely if they spent one zloty for activity more than for the consumerism, they devoted one hour more to the activity than on pleasure – here are these unfortunate alternative concerts – if they would devote themselves to specific activity so as preparing and doing different projects, talking to neighbours, handing out leaflets it is this movement would look totally different. If people started giving up alcohol, giving up nicotine, we would already have as many as half of the national television in our hands"[15]*.

The main criterion here could be the time of action of the group, civil society, by definition, is more institutionalized and is active in a bigger time span, although cases of social movements or their campaigns that lasting for years can be clearly shown (for example the gay rights movements in the US or European anti-nuclear campaigns). The attributes that could help drawing a line could be:

– source of financing: for civil society actors it comes from states, supranational organizations (in Europe usually from the EU), for social movements it is more 'grassroots' and relies on benefit actions (like concerts) and raising money among the participants or supporters but avoiding institutionalized actors;

– attitude towards the state: social movements are confrontational and

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14   http://www.spunk.org/library/places/russia/sp000116.txt

15   Interview 12

present their lists of demands, which if fulfilled mean the end of a campaign / movements whereas civil society actors (understood as NGOs) often cooperate with governments and authorities, criticizing it occasionally but not getting confrontational;

– social movements, at least in recent years, tend to politicize their claims; civil society actors play a much more supporting and ideologically neutral role than the movements. This is applicable to both left-leaning and more right-wing oriented groups;

– there is no collective identity of civil society actors and the reasons for participation are not rooted in the ideology or counterculture, but are a result of other reasons. What is more, being active in an NGO does not require devoting as much time or changes in the lifestyle, which becomes totally unrelated to the issue of activism. This professionalization is often one of the major accusations made towards the NGO sector as being unrepresentative of the civil society. As Cas Mudde summarized it: *"In many ways 'uncivil movements' [...] are more authentic representatives of civil society in post-communist Europe. Not only do they indeed fill the space between the household and the (national) state; they also play an important role in the process of democratization, be it directly or indirectly (by provoking 'civil' movements to respond their challenge). Moreover, unlike many prominent 'civil' organizations in Eastern Europe, which are elite-driven NGOs detached from society, many 'uncivil' organizations are true social movements, i.e. involved in grassroots supported contentious politics (cf. Tarrow 2002)"* (Mudde 2003:164).

Conclusion

In the preceding section I tried to show how within the main discussion about civil society, the emergence of it is seen both during the communist times and after the changes of 1989. I had a few aims I wanted to achieve: firstly to show that the foundations of the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s was a very politicized project, based on the distinction between 'us' (the society) and 'them' (the communists). Although strategies to make this plan succeed were different in different countries, the goal was to create a parallel structure within the society to form the base for a mass movement to overthrow the regime. This juxtaposition was initially a non-political concept, if anything the communist countries could not be political these days. But together with the development of these individual structures and the leaning of the dissidents towards more neoliberal positions some people couldn't find their place on the scene. Especially young people who were trying to apply the concepts imported from Western countries, either on the level of subculture or of ideas (for example concepts of radical ecology). With the dissidents recruiting from *intelligentsia* and intellectual elites, less and less

space was left for spontaneous and creative actions, what led to the creation of the 'third cycle' was especially that the issues important to these people, like the already mentioned environmental protection or compulsory military service, were not raised by the dissidents.

This division has a few consequences. Firstly, because the new sphere was created mostly by young people, the size of it was much smaller, especially after the transformation, when many former dissidents became the new elites or moved to businesses. This kind of generational gap on the one hand stigmatizes the alternative movement as connected to youth (sub)culture, and on the other hand might result in its smaller (compared to Western countries) size. Also, with the shift of the elites, many parts of the society became obsolete for the new elites, or at least they lost their representation, with the best examples of the workers and Solidarność movement. With 'cultural anticommunism' dominating the mainstream political discourse, the rise of the left-leaning groups was difficult, so some parts of these abandoned groups were 'managed' by the radical right and populist parties and groups.

The second important issue is the way social society institutions were introduced within the region after 1989. The neoliberal model of the 3rd sector, complementary to the state and the market, that became funding sources. Most of the civic initiatives were formed into the patterns of NGOs, becoming less and less political. This form of civil society was imported 'from the outside', and – paradoxically – had a political context (despite attempts to be against this kind of involvement) and was meant to secure the young democracy. Not only it was seen as a necessary part of a stable system, legitimizing the changes and giving a stable foundation for political institutions, but also responded to the fear of instability of the new states. As the Balkan case shows, the fear of the new countries falling into a spiral of nationalistic violence and populism, was not completely without a reason.

Nevertheless, some groups had emerged who might be labeled as 'alter-globalist' – representing grassroots activism and mobilizing people around more political issues than the NGOs. Being also different in their organizational forms – they are fundamentally skeptical of hierarchical models – and often critical about the relationship with the state or the market. Being independent from these, they have much more space for action, but at the same time far less resources. The relations between these two currents are a line of tensions revolving around the questions of level of engagement, relations with the state and authorities, ethical concerns of financing their activities. Both of them share though one thing in common, which is the scale of the social activism in Central and Eastern Europe, which everyone I spoke to claimed is very low. The situation also looks like this in the eyes of scholars and experts on civil society: *"compared to other regions in the world, including other (Western) democracies and the post-authoritarian states of Latin America and Southern Europe, membership in voluntary organizations in post-communist Eastern Europe is distinctly lower (Howard 2002; Curtis et al. 2001). Moreover, public trust in various civil and political institutions - another oft-used indicator of the vibrancy of civil society*

– is also remarkably low throughout the post-communist region (Sztompka 1998; Rose 1994)" (Kopecky 2003:5-6).

This might be a result of the communist legacy (where either one was engaged in anti-regime activities or were 'collaborators' of it) or with the more general trend of disillusionment and disappointment with politics and as an extension with everything that takes part in the public sphere. This might be the secondary cause of the low level of activism and at the same time a consequence of the changes: the individualization of everyday life, as well as political life, left much less space for cooperation.

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