

## **By the Masses or for the Masses? The Transformation of Voluntary Action in the Czech Union for Nature Protection**

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*After the fall of state-socialism, efforts were made to build democracy by creating civil society organizations (CSOs) and forming independent nonprofit sectors across Central and Eastern Europe. However, most of these efforts ignored the mass organizations, state-sponsored interest groups, and quasi-independent associations in existence for many years. To understand how the transition affected existing associations and the forms of volunteerism they promoted, this paper investigates changes in the Czech Union for Nature Protection (ČSOP), an organization that has endured since 1979. Here, it is found that rather than retaining its emphasis on classical modes of voluntary action and participant interaction, ČSOP favors professionally managed activities designed to attract financial support. The case suggests that some of the participatory practices and collectivist norms advanced by associations in socialist times are being weakened as these groups attempt to secure the resources necessary to survive.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

During the era of state-socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, tens of thousands of people routinely participated in voluntary activities sponsored by

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social, cultural, and other types of special interest associations. For instance, when the Czechoslovak government wanted to build a series of dams and reservoirs in the early 1980s, brigades of volunteers who were members of both youth and adult conservation organizations traveled to the areas that were going to be flooded, dug up protected plant species, and transferred them to higher ground where they would be safe. Similarly, when the administration of the protected landscape area in the White Carpathians wanted to keep the forest from encroaching on the habitat of over 20 varieties of wild orchids, it enlisted brigades of volunteers to routinely mow the hay fields where these endangered species grow. These activities not only helped to preserve the nation's biodiversity, they also established a culture of civic engagement among its citizens.

Civic engagement refers to individual and collective participation in activities that advance the public interest and address issues of societal importance. Many of these activities, and the norms of cooperation and integration they promote, tend to be attributed to the presence of independent associations and the types of nonprofit sectors commonly found in democratic systems (e.g., Evans and Boyte, 1992; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999). In the former Czechoslovakia, as well as in other countries across the region, high levels of participation were present. In contrast to the autonomous associations found in most democracies, however, special interest groups typically were formed and controlled by the state. Further, membership frequently was expected of individuals by virtue of their affiliation with another group (e.g., school classes and factories) and participation in brigades that did volunteer work was a common membership requirement. Although mandatory participation was a vehicle for the state to promote its goals and inculcate participatory and collectivist values (Hough, 1976), in many cases, organizational membership was still a matter of individual choice and, when possible, people joined associations where they could work on societal issues that were of personal concern (interview with ČSOP representative, 2001).

After the collapse of state-socialism, foreign aid and other forms of democracy assistance were provided so that countries in Central and Eastern Europe could establish autonomous associations and independent nonprofit sectors. The intent was that this would foster the realization of democratic ideals and ultimately stabilize democratic practices (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Quigley, 2000). Since that time, scholarly research has examined the characteristics of the emergent nonprofit sectors, the capacity challenges that the organizations within them have encountered, and the overall character of national civil societies (e.g., Anheier and Priller, 1991; Bernard, 1993; DeHoog and Racanska, 2003; Green, 1999; Howard, 2003; Kuti, 1999; Lagerspetz *et al.*, 2002; Potůček, 2000; Regulska, 1999; Wunker, 1991). While these studies offer numerous insights into the changes that have taken place, we know little about the current status of civic engagement in the region (Kuti, 2004), particularly the ways that the transition affected state-controlled associations and the voluntary activities these groups sponsored. In

this study, therefore, we trace the history of one organization that has spanned regimes—the Czech Union for Nature Protection (Český svaz ochránců přírody—ČSOP)—as a means for assessing the ways that civic engagement has been altered as a consequence of the transition from state-socialism to democracy.

### **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, VOLUNTARY ACTION, AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION**

States influence the nature of civic engagement by defining institutional opportunities for participation in public affairs. They also establish the degree of autonomy granted to social, cultural, and political associations. In democratic systems of governance, individuals are free to form and participate in autonomous civil society organizations (CSOs). Broadly defined, CSOs consist of nonstate and noneconomic entities such as civic and cultural organizations, social movements, advocacy groups, and professional associations (Clark, 2003). Though they may be independent, CSOs are still held accountable for their activities and required to meet state-imposed requirements (Chisolm, 1995; Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Fry, 1995). For instance, in most countries, national legislation places limitations on the percentage of lobbying and political activities in which these groups can engage. It also is common for democratic states to require that CSOs submit annual financial statements to demonstrate that they are in compliance with their not-for-profit status (Chisolm, 1995; McCarthy *et al.*, 1991). In return for satisfying reporting and other administrative and practical requirements, CSOs are granted autonomy to engage in a wide variety of activities and assume a diverse range of responsibilities on behalf of their constituents and society-at-large (Brody, 2002; Cohen and Arato, 1992; McCarthy *et al.*, 1991).

In contrast to democratic systems, Soviet-type regimes were characterized by state control of most aspects of social, cultural, and political life (Hough, 1976). In socialist Czechoslovakia, for example, this led to mass organizations being subordinated to the Communist Party apparatus through their affiliation with a state entity called the National Front (Národní fronta).<sup>4</sup> These organizations, many of which had chapters in local communities, schools, and workplaces, included political parties, labor unions, youth groups, women's associations, athletic clubs (Rau, 1991; Toma, 1979; Ulč, 1975; Wolchik, 1991), and a bevy of special interest groups such as hunters, beekeepers, and firemen (Carmin, 2003). In addition to mass organizations, numerous smaller special interest associations that had no affiliation with the National Front also were established and sponsored by the state. Further, although all formal associations were required to be registered and were subject to government scrutiny and control (Fisher, 1993; NROS, 1994),

<sup>4</sup>Similar to other countries in the region, the term “mass” referred to both the size of the organizations and the breadth of the subpopulation that each encompassed (Anheier and Priller, 1991).

quasi-independent associations were still formed. Since these types of associations were unable to receive official status through much of the socialist era, they typically were situated within other bodies such as mass sports and hiking unions and state-controlled associations ranging from academic and museum societies to nature conservation groups. Similar to mass organizations and special interest groups, quasi-independent associations were subjected to ongoing state surveillance and interference (Cuhrová, 2002; Zajoncová, 2004).

Individual participation in brigades that did “volunteer” work frequently was compulsory in associations (NROS, 1994; Parrott, 1997). These voluntary activities provided a means for organizations to demonstrate their contribution to socialist society and for individuals to participate in well-defined aspects of public life (Hough, 1976). While control of associations was designed to ensure that the separation between society and the state would be minimized (Hough, 1976), members nonetheless developed social networks and bonds of trust as they worked together and gained familiarity with each other (Lane, 2005). Drawing on the relations they developed, dissidents and other independent-minded individuals sometimes would establish subgroups within state-sponsored associations so that they would have a legitimate means for gathering and, in turn, a forum for exchanging ideas and information that often were obtained through underground channels (Rau, 1991; Siegel and Yancey, 1992; Skilling, 1988; Tismaneanu, 1993). The pressure to engage in voluntary action may not have embodied the democratic ideal of civic engagement. However, individuals generally joined special interest organizations and participated in those activities that reflected their personal interests and provided opportunities for self-expression (Kundrata, 2001). Though mandated activities may have been in the service of state ideology (Hough, 1976), they still served to foster participation, cooperation, integration, and information exchange among individuals who shared similar values, views, and concerns (Kundrata, 2001; Lane, 2005).

After the fall of the state-socialism, foreign governments, intergovernmental organizations, and private foundations rushed to provide expertise and financial support in order to promote democracy and build civic capacity across Central and Eastern Europe (Carmin and Hicks, 2002; Quigley, 2000). For example, it is estimated that the United States disbursed US\$599 million and that the European Union dedicated US\$891 million to democracy assistance in the region (Mendelson and Glenn, 2002). Private foundations from around the world including the German Marshall Fund, Milieukontakt Oosteuropa, Open Society Fund, Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, and Sasakawa Foundation also provided significant levels of support (Carmin and Hicks, 2002). In many instances, these donor funds were used to stabilize and professionalize the small number of highly visible organizations that had formed in the period leading up to the fall of the communist regimes and to form new CSOs that could implement donor interests and priorities (Mendelson and Glenn, 2002; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000).

Democracy promotion efforts typically are based on the assumption that an associational fabric woven from independent CSOs will foster inclusion, cooperation, and trust (Putnam, 1993, 2000), provide a means for alternative views and repressed perspectives to be voiced (Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999), and cultivate social action and civic engagement (Cohen and Arato, 1992). Throughout the transition period, a number of the associations that had been active for years in Central and Eastern Europe made efforts to distance themselves from the ties they had to the former regime so that they could continue on as independent organizations. However, the focus of many governmental and foundation democracy assistance programs was on professional organizations with reform-oriented agendas (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000). As a result, at the same time that foreign donors and experts were espousing the importance of associations for democratic practice, they were neglecting the organizations that for years had been fostering norms of participation, cooperation, and trust (Lane, 2005; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000).

### **VOLUNTARY ACTION IN THE CZECH UNION FOR NATURE PROTECTION**

Scholarly research has critiqued both the approaches that have been taken and the outcomes achieved by democracy promotion efforts (e.g., Mendelson and Glenn, 2002; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Quigley, 2000; Wedel, 1998). Because these studies, as well as investigations of civil society and nonprofit sector development, tend to focus on macro-level patterns (e.g., Anheier and Priller, 1991; Bernard, 1993; DeHoog and Racanska, 2003; Green, 1999; Howard, 2003; Kuti, 1999; Lagerspetz *et al.*, 2002; Potůček, 2000; Regulska, 1999; Wunker, 1991), our understanding of the ways that the transition from socialism to democracy has affected state-sponsored associations and voluntary action is limited. Therefore, we developed an in-depth case study of the history and changes that have taken place over time in the Czech Union for Nature Protection (ČSOP). This organization was selected because it was founded by the state in socialist times as a special interest group and has remained active since the fall of the regime. Further, even though ČSOP was an important conservation organization with many members and chapters, its state-affiliation resulted in its being virtually ignored by foreign donors and experts seeking to aid civil society and promote democratic ideals.

We studied the formative years of ČSOP through secondary sources including organizational newsletters and documents, graduate papers and theses, and member-developed histories. To learn about the organization's more recent history, in 2003 and 2004, we conducted semistructured interviews lasting between 1 and 2 hours with 10 individuals who were members of the governing council from the early-1980s onward. Since ČSOP has always had active chapters, we interviewed representatives from Prague as well as from other cities and towns across the country. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The

transcriptions were then reviewed for accuracy. Interviews that were conducted in Czech were translated into English and carefully reviewed to ensure that they captured both the content and the meaning intended by the speaker. After analyzing the transcripts and secondary materials, we developed time-ordered matrices (Miles and Huberman, 1994) so that we could systematically identify changes in key aspects of the organization's conservation activities, administrative practices, and management techniques.

### THE RISE AND SPREAD OF VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION (1978–1989)

The origins of ČSOP are intertwined with the history and development of Yew (TIS), an organization that emerged as a result of informal nature education meetings that the zoologist Otakar Leiský held for youth in the late 1950s (Zajoncová, 2003). Since it was not possible to form autonomous associations at that time, Leiský organized the group as a section of the Scientific Association of the Society of the National Museum in Prague in 1958 (Vaněk, 1996). In 1969, Yew was able to obtain official registration as an independent organization as a consequence of the political openness of Prague Spring. However, after the orthodox wing of the communist party reasserted control, the organization was viewed with suspicion and regarded as having a political or subversive agenda. The view that Yew was a politicized organization was reinforced by its tendency to provide shelter to prohibited groups such as Boy Scouts and Woodcraft (Cuhrová, 2002; interview with ČSOP representative, 2004i) and to publicly oppose government projects they perceived as being detrimental to the environment such as the Dlouhé stráně dam (Leiský, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Although Yew was a popular organization, its independence ultimately led to its demise. In August 1978, the government of the Czech Socialist Republic charged the Ministry of Culture with developing a proposal for a new conservation organization to replace Yew (Vaněk, 1996). Although it took almost a decade, in September 1979, Yew was abolished and replaced by ČSOP, a state-formed organization for teens and adults that emphasized nature conservation and education (interviews with ČSOP representatives, 2004b,g,i; Vaněk, 2002).

From the outset, ČSOP had a Central Committee (Orálek and Schauer, 1999) and a Central Secretariat, both of which addressed internal administrative matters as well as represented ČSOP externally to state authorities, the Czechoslovak

<sup>5</sup>Scouting (Junak-český skaut) became a popular youth activity in the Czech Lands in the early 1900s (Waic and Kössl, 1992). Woodcraft, which was popularized at about the same time, was founded in the United States by Ernest Thompson Seton at the beginning of the twentieth century to foster appreciation for outdoor life and environmental conservation, camaraderie among fellow participants, and sensitivity to Native American culture and lore (Morris, 1970).

media, and foreign partner organizations (Damohorský, 1995). The Secretariat also was in charge of organizing the meetings of the Central Committee and Congresses held once every 5 years and was responsible for establishing offices at the district level. These regional affiliates, in turn, provided expertise and limited start-up funds to local chapters. Once the chapters were in place, they were situated within a rigid hierarchical structure built on the principle of “democratic centralism” that had important implications for funding. Local chapters would submit proposals for support to their district office. If the proposal were approved at this level, it would be sent on for final acceptance by the central office (Damohorský, 1995). Though ČSOP was centered in Prague, had highly formalized reporting and funding relationships (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004e), and encouraged chapters to participate in some of its national conservation initiatives, in most other respects the local chapters were relatively independent from the major offices (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004h; Růžička, 1993).

ČSOP’s environmental activities were dominated in this period by what was referred to as “small ecology” and, more specifically, “special” nature conservation. This meant that the organization focused on apolitical activities oriented toward education and the conservation of protected plant and animal species (Damohorský, 1995). For instance, members planted trees, organized scientific exhibitions and public lectures, built instructional paths in protected areas, and sponsored biological competitions for children. Several Union-wide programs for mapping flora and fauna were launched during this time as well. In addition, ČSOP published handbooks on ecological education and on the protection of amphibians, bats, storks, and other animal species. In 1980, ČSOP also began publishing its monthly magazine, *Through Our Nature (Naší přírodou)* (Barták and Moravec, 2004; Damohorský, 1995; Orálek and Schauer, 1999).

Largely insulated from wider international developments most of the 1980s, ČSOP focused on national issues and continued to engage in small ecology through its educational activities and practical nature conservation work. One way that the organization attracted members and drew the attention of the Czechoslovak public was through widely publicized “rescue operations.” These involved members transferring protected plant species to higher ground before the areas where they were situated were flooded by newly built reservoirs. Though these activities were highly publicized by the media, the main work of the organization remained the traditional education and conservation activities envisioned by the regime. Accordingly, these involved ongoing mapping, tree planting, and species protection initiatives, instructional path creation and maintenance, youth camps and competitions, and scientific publications, exhibitions, and public lectures (Barták and Moravec, 2004). As a result, of these efforts, during the first 5 years of ČSOP’s existence, members planted 534,840 trees, collected 88 tons of paper that was then recycled, and organized 297 exhibitions,

299 biological competitions for children, and 3,914 public lectures (Barták and Moravec, 2004).

At its fifth anniversary in 1984, ČSOP had 23,714 individual members who were affiliated with one of 768 local chapters. In addition, the organization had 364 collective members (e.g., museums and protected areas) a large paid staff members and sponsored 171 affiliated youth clubs called Young Nature Protectionists (Sdružení mladých ochránců přírody) (Barták and Moravec, 2004). Individual membership required making a nominal dues payment each year and “volunteering” to participate in brigades that worked on publicly beneficial activities. Each chapter was free to determine the number of brigades in which individuals had to participate to qualify for and retain their membership. While participation in brigades may have been obligatory, as indicated by a long-time member, many individuals joined ČSOP because they were interested in conservation and had a personal commitment to participating in the organization’s activities:

I think a good thing of ČSOP was that it enabled people who were really interested in nature conservation to self-organize, to have an official label, to organize things, and to raise a little money to do projects under this certain umbrella. There were a number of very active and nice local groups . . . they did their job and . . . while doing this job together, they built good [personal] relationships. People also talked about political issues and so on, but the important factor was their interest in nature conservation. (Interview with ČSOP representative, 2004h).

Participation in conservation brigades may have satisfied membership obligations and societal expectations. However, these activities also fostered skills related to self-organization and contributed to the development of networks and the formation of social ties.

In 1983, the overall income of the Union was about 1 million Czechoslovak crowns (approximately US\$40,000). Half of these funds were obtained through a grant from the Ministry of Culture while the remainder came from individual and collective membership fees (Barták and Moravec, 2004). Grants and membership fees ensured organizational stability. However, it was the adoption of a new national economic directive in 1984 that served as a financial turning point for the organization since it required some government bodies to contract and pay for ČSOP services. As a result, ČSOP chapters would receive payments from protected area authorities, agricultural enterprises, and local municipalities for providing services such as tree planting, clearing parks of rubbish, and looking after local greenery (Damohorský, 1995). Often, members served as volunteers in brigades that completed these types of contract work while the chapters that sponsored the activities were compensated. For instance, the protected area authority in charge of maintaining the meadows where rare species of orchids grow would contract the local chapter of ČSOP to attend to mowing and other management tasks. The members would perform these tasks in their spare time and the chapter would receive compensation for their efforts. These funds were then used by the



chapter to purchase materials, fund educational programs, and sponsor nature trips for members (interviews with ČSOP representatives, 2004c,f,h).

Because of its wide reach and large membership, ČSOP was able to cultivate awareness of nature and promote volunteer participation in a diverse range of conservation activities. At the same time, because ČSOP nurtured the autonomy of local groups, many chapters developed a strong entrepreneurial culture. Though there was a great deal of national-level support for the organization's activities, due to the new directive, chapters generated additional income by managing nature reserves and forests, planting trees, maintaining meadows and fields, and, in some cases, drafting expert reports. By 1989, ČSOP's management activities had increased to the point where local chapters were in charge of the maintenance of 486 localities. In other words, 47.5% of all small-scale protected areas in the Czech Socialist Republic were being managed by ČSOP's volunteer membership (Barták and Moravec, 2004).

### CRISIS, DECLINE, AND REVITALIZATION OF ČSOP (1989–1997)

In November 1989, a peaceful uprising known as the Velvet Revolution led to the collapse of state-socialism in Czechoslovakia. In the period preceding this historic transformation, numerous state-sponsored special interest groups adopted environmental themes as a means for expressing not only their environmental concerns, but their discontent with the regime. At the same time, dedicated environmental organizations that operated independently formed and engaged in protest to call attention to the degree of environmental degradation that was present and the threats these conditions were posing to human health. Some ČSOP chapters followed suit and used contentious tactics to communicate their concerns about mounting levels of pollution. Most, however, concentrated on their routine forms of nature conservation and education (Jehlička, 2001; Vaněk, 1996).

In many ways, the years immediately preceding the overthrow of the communist regime were a golden age for ČSOP and for the realization of the socialist vision for the organization. By contemporary standards, the organization was well funded and well regarded. In addition to a strong central administration, the chapters in the cities of Brno and České Budějovice and the town of Valašské Meziříčí served as major hubs of activity. Membership had risen to 26,000 and there were some 970 local chapters (Barták and Moravec, 2004). As an official nature conservation organization, ČSOP not only promoted civic responsibility and awareness of nature, it relied on its members to actively participate in the protection and management of nature.

Although ČSOP had become a strong organization, in the period after the Velvet Revolution it encountered significant problems as a result of the political and economic changes that were taking place. Almost immediately, membership declined by over 60% (Barták and Moravec, 2004). Some people left to take new

posts in the state administration while others went on to form new environmental groups or reestablish associations that had been banned in former times. However, since membership still was perceived as requiring a commitment of time and energy, the majority left because they needed to give priority to their livelihood (Damohorský, 1995).

In addition to challenges arising from the departure of membership, the changes that were implemented in state funding policy suddenly made it difficult for ČSOP to obtain sufficient resources to support its administrative apparatus. The necessary reduction in the number of employees in the central office due to lack of funds, led to internal turmoil as the organization was unable to perform basic tasks such as bookkeeping, communication with local chapters, publishing annual reports, and filing membership information. Further, power struggles emerged between various factions within the organization. One of these struggles was a territorial dispute between Prague and Northern Moravia over a wide range of issues including the location of the ČSOP's headquarters (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a). A second conflict was between those representing the youth clubs affiliated with ČSOP and those representing the interests of nature conservation (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004f; Orálek and Schauer, 1999). Reflecting on the organization during this era, a leading member succinctly stated, "At that time, there was unbelievable chaos . . . it was really ugly here" (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a).

In an attempt to stave off further conflict, the Congress held in 1991 elected Bedřich Moldan as the new head of the organization. Prominent and publicly known, Moldan was a widely respected figure within the environmental movement and commanded a remarkable degree of authority in academic circles. His public standing was undoubtedly strengthened by his recent experience as the first Czech minister of the environment. The Congress also decided to abolish the principle of subordination of local chapters to district committees (though it still allowed local chapters to form committees at the district or regional level on a voluntary basis). An immediate consequence of this decision was a further worsening of communication within the Union. The Congress also increased the autonomy of local chapters. Rather than adhere to extensive reporting procedures, from that point forward, local chapters only had to submit an annual report and pass on an agreed share of their membership fees (Damohorský, 1995). Though the rapid transformations taking place created challenges for ČSOP, it is important to note that since it always was distinct from its Slovak counterpart, the Slovak Union of Nature and Landscape Protectors (*Slovenský zväz ochrancov prírody a krajiny*), the organization's administration was not notably affected by the separation of the Czech and Slovak Republics that took place at the beginning of 1992.

After several years of uncertainty about the status of the Union, ČSOP officially became a nonprofit organization. A common practice for nonprofit organizations in some countries is to rely on dues-paying members to support their activities. At this point, this approach was not possible for ČSOP. By 1994

membership had dipped below 5,000 and only 289 local chapters remained (Barták and Moravec, 2004). ČSOP offset the low levels of membership support in this period with annual funds of approximately 4.5 million Czech crowns (approximately US\$ 185,000) from the Ministry of the Environment (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a; Damohorský, 1995). However, because funding was based on a 5-year contract that was going to expire in 1997, the need to secure sources of support was a priority within the organization. Although international donors were working to build civil society and support a wide range of organizations during this period, most ignored organizations such as ČSOP in favor of groups that were focusing on democratic reform or that had high levels of international or political visibility (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000). With few funding opportunities available, ČSOP representatives at the national and local levels focused on writing grant applications, most of which they submitted to the Ministry of Education (for projects for the youth section) and the Ministry of the Environment (Damohorský, 1995).

By the late 1990s, the worst of the internal crises had been resolved and ČSOP began to show signs that it was going to survive the transition. Bedřich Moldan proved a strong leader who was able to quash infighting and take decisive action (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a). For example, at an assembly of the Union held in 1995, his threat to resign if the assembly failed to elect his second deputy and approve the expansion of the Central Office resulted in the outcomes he desired (Damohorský, 1995). He also was able to reorient the organization and its activities in two critical ways. First, he was an advocate for public participation in environmental management and cooperation between ČSOP and government bodies as a means for realizing this goal (Tickle, 2000). Second, he revitalized many of the organization's activities and improved communication. This included launching a range of new programs aimed at species and habitat protection and sending a copy of the ČSOP newsletter, *ČSOP Dispatch (Depeše ČSOP)*, to every member of the organization as opposed to only the Chairs of local chapters. ČSOP also began to be more active on the international front, for instance, by becoming a member of the World Conservation Union (Damohorský, 1995). This combination of efforts directed at strengthening internal management, conservation programs, and organizational visibility were fruitful and, for the first time since 1989, the membership of ČSOP began to increase (Barták and Moravec, 2004).

### EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL CONSERVATION (1998–2004)

The 1997 Congress focused on acknowledging and continuing the positive trends that had been taking place within ČSOP. Seeing that the transformation he envisioned was well underway, and sensing the need for a new generation of leadership, Bedřich Moldan decided to step down and invited the ČSOP veterans on the Central Executive Council to follow suit (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a). Taking advantage of the opportunity for a younger generation to guide the

Union, the Congress elected Petr Dolejský, the Director of the White Carpathian Protected Area, as the new Chair. It also established a seven-member Board of the Central Executive Council and charged it with overseeing the operational agenda of the Union. This change was important since, by creating a forum that could be in regular contact and make decisions between meetings of the Central Executive Council, ČSOP became far more flexible than at any other time in its history (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004f).

Building on its revitalized foundation and invigorated by its new leadership, ČSOP emerged from the 1997 Congress as a more consolidated and energized organization. A collectively held view is that, “ČSOP differs from other organizations because of its focus on practical nature conservation” (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004g). A sentiment expressed by one member, and echoed by many others, is that the changes that took place after 1989 did not alter this distinctive feature of the organization:

I think ČSOP has stayed with its main focus on nature conservation. Even though we see some trends to include heritage conservation and some local chapters are trying to work on consumer issues, if I look at the mainstream and also at the quality and capacity of the central office in Prague, I see nature conservation, pervasive nature and landscape conservation, as a main focus. (Interview with ČSOP representative, 2004h)

Although administrative changes were essential to ensure the survival of ČSOP, the leadership recognized the importance of direct conservation and took steps to reinforce this aspect of the organization's identity. For instance, in the past, ČSOP provided a haven for special interest groups with outdoor and environmentally-related themes (e.g., environmentalists concerned with issues other than nature conservation, Scouts, Woodcrafters, vegetarians, and pet lovers). A further factor strengthening internal cohesion was that many of these groups elected to depart. As a result, ČSOP's membership became more homogeneous and its activities ever more clearly defined in terms of practical nature conservation and education.

With the organization's orientation reaffirmed, the need to ensure financial stability became a paramount issue that affected decisions about the form that conservation and education activities should take (Damohorský, 1995). Traditional clients of ČSOP's volunteer brigades, such as protected area authorities and agricultural enterprises, were turning to private companies since they no longer were bound to use services from the organization. In some instances, local chapters not only continued to receive fees for service provision, but were able to turn these activities into a source of livelihood. Others, however, were losing their main source of income and, in some cases, their *raison d'être* as well (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004g). The need to look for an alternative model of financing for the Union was further highlighted by the pending expiration of the contract between ČSOP and the Ministry of the Environment. With limited opportunities to earn money from services, and the contract providing guaranteed state funding coming to an end, the only prospective sources of support that the leadership

thought viable were grants, corporate sponsorship, and membership fees (ČSOP, 2003; interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a).

The new leadership decided that they should work on all three of these areas, but at the national level, they should place a priority on increasing membership since this would give the organization greater financial stability as well as greater political clout (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004b). Though various ideas were considered, the new leadership coalesced around the notion of promoting greater openness toward its current and prospective members and toward society at large. These ideas pointed to the need to raise the public and media profile of the Union and to develop new forms of public-friendly activities. With respect to membership, they began to promote a program called the Green Card. This program, which was adopted in the early 1990s, and which gives members a discount on admission fees to a number of heritage sites throughout the Czech Republic, began to be more fully promoted in 2000 (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004b). A second initiative with respect to existing members was the decision to produce a new magazine. As a way to link members to their Czech heritage and invoke favorable images of time gone by, they called the publication *Beauty of our Home* (*Krásy našeho domova*), the same name as the magazine produced by the Beautification Association, an organization that had been active in the early and mid-1900s (Kundrata, 1992).

To improve its public image more broadly, ČSOP employed a person charged with public relations and initiated several projects designed to improve the standing of the organization in the eyes of the public. Since 1997, for instance, the Union has been gradually expanding the National Network of Handicapped Wildlife Stations that provide medial and rehabilitation care for such animals (ČSOP, 2003). In addition to creating a favorable image for the organization, this activity has been successful in attracting corporate sponsors such as the Czech Saving Bank and the car manufacturer Škoda. Though programs such as the Wildlife Stations are innovative and successful at attracting public attention, they are primarily window-dressing as the bulk of the Union's activities still are its specialized programs aimed at species and habitat protection (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a). Accordingly, ČSOP reached out to local communities by establishing a network of 41 eco-centers in 2002, the majority of which are located in small towns. These centers run environmental awareness campaigns, sponsor lectures, discussion sessions, and educational programs for schools, provide up-to-date information on environment quality, and organize hands-on conservation work for volunteers (ČSOP, 2003).

More recently, ČSOP gave official status to the regional centers that had informally been in existence since 1990 (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a). The hubs have been important resources for the local chapters, providing assistance on writing grant proposals, advising them on sources of funding, keeping them abreast with new administrative requirements such as double bookkeeping,

and facilitating their networking. Regional governments also have become a new source of funding for the nonprofit sector in the Czech Republic and ČSOP's regional centers have been successful in competing for these funds (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004f).

Greater political openness has helped ČSOP identify international approaches that can be used to enhance local and national conservation. In some instances, international ties are developed by a single chapter and ideas are imported for specific projects (interviews with ČSOP representatives, 2004d,i). In other instances, international programs are Union-wide. For instance, the Place for Nature program is essentially a land trust movement initiated by ČSOP and implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of the Environment and the Partnership Foundation. The vision was that local chapters would maintain their traditional approach to voluntary action through land management. In 2002, ČSOP was able to obtain land trust status for 29 plots of land that they had leased, followed by the purchase of three additional smaller areas (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a). ČSOP's appeal to the public for financial support for the program was highly successful. Within just a few months of making the request some 2,000 people, the majority of whom were not members, sent donations. As a result, ČSOP now has more money for the purpose of establishing land trusts than local chapters are able to realize (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004a).

The approach that has been taken to developing the membership base and stabilizing the organization has led to a significant transition within ČSOP. Rather than cultivate cadres of volunteers to work on local projects, the organization is developing initiatives that attract a "paper" or dues-paying membership. While the membership roster has grown and the financial outlook is promising as a result of these efforts, it has come at a cost since the organizational culture, particularly with regard to activities within local chapters, has been altered:

Today we no longer do environmental education for free, but if a class wants to come to us, they have to pay 10 crowns per student and maybe 20 crowns for a half-day session. Or services for nature protection—the state nature preservation [authorities] have gotten used to us, they know we do certain things well and up to standard . . . so they pay us for care of protected areas. (Interview with ČSOP representative, 2004i)

I think that the trend is that those groups which are more active are getting more professional and trying to fight as they can within this difficult [economic] environment . . . For the smaller groups, or for those that are really based only on volunteer capacity, it's more and more difficult to survive because people have less time to give. (Interview with ČSOP representative, 2004h)

[Before 1989] no one was employed [by local chapters of ČSOP], part-time or full-time, so it was basically a big organization that worked based on the ties of friendship. The way it turned out [in our chapter] was that at a certain point we made this a purely professional organization, so we gradually lost the people who wanted to be just members. (Interview with ČSOP representative, 2004f)

ČSOP has a long tradition of local chapters receiving fees for services. The growing emphasis in this direction has had varied impacts on the organization. On the positive side, professionalization has cultivated human capital and promoted environmental innovation. For example, the local chapter of ČSOP in the town of Spálené Poříčí helped to establish a high school for educating public environmental administrators (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004f). The ČSOP chapter called Kosenka has been cooperating with area farmers to reintroduce extensive grazing to the fields and meadows through the purchase of sheep and cattle. Working in collaboration with the ČSOP chapter Veronica, Kosenka has been environmentally proactive as evidenced by the ecological reed-bed sewage treatment plant, biomass heating plant, and small factory to produce organic apple juice that they built in the village of Hostětin (interviews with ČSOP representatives, 2004d,i). As these examples suggest, ČSOP's activities are having favorable environmental impacts. At the same time, as professionalized approaches to conservation and education become increasingly important within the organization, they appear to be marginalizing volunteerism and, in the process, undermining some of the social and societal functions formerly realized by members who were active in their chapters.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION FOR VOLUNTARY ACTION**

The case of ČSOP illustrates that state-sponsored interest groups under state-socialism promoted civic engagement that led to social interaction and the formation of social ties. Though the organization was controlled by the state, the cadres of party members who staffed and monitored the organization typically were busy with their administrative posts. In general, this resulted in members of local chapters being distant from these higher administrative levels of the organization and many of the related party controls (interview with ČSOP representative, 2004i; Růžička, 1993; Vaněk, 2002). Individuals who joined ČSOP because they were interested in its activities readily participated in the direct conservation work that the organization sponsored. The voluntary work performed by members had important consequences for nature conservation and natural resource management. For example, it provided a nation-wide infrastructure for managing trails, forests, and protected areas, monitoring ecological conditions, and providing environmental education. Volunteer experiences also trained people in resource management and engendered an appreciation for both the natural beauty and the scientific aspects of environmental protection.

ČSOP's activities not only were important for nature conservation, they also had broader societal impacts. Theories related to democracy, civil society, and nonprofit organizations all suggest that CSOs are an important means for promoting democratic ideals (e.g., Cohen and Arato, 1992; Evans and Boyte, 1992;

Putnam, 1993, 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999). Even though ČSOP was state-controlled, the interactions among members and the norms that emerged had many of the characteristics associated with CSOs in democratic systems. For instance, the voluntary conservation work performed by members was a form of civic engagement while the camaraderie that emerged through voluntary conservation work fostered cooperation, inclusion, and trust. Further, although it was not the organization's primary function, once bonds of trust were established, members used some of their gatherings to discuss alternative and oppositional views and to surface perspectives that were repressed by the state.

Though ČSOP remains directly involved in conservation and resource management, the reliance on an engaged membership that is dedicated to voluntary action is presently far less central to the organization than it was in socialist times. Instead, the focus is on increasing the number of dues-paying members, enhancing the organization's image, and obtaining grants and corporate sponsorship in order to ensure organizational stability. In other words, the emphasis has shifted from direct involvement through voluntary action and hands-on activities to professionally run activities that attract financial support. While some of ČSOP's activities still rely on volunteers, many are large-scale programs run by small groups within the organization or are fee-for-service activities conducted by the professionals who make their living from working for ČSOP. The entrepreneurial spirit that has long characterized ČSOP remains strong. However, rather than being expressed in voluntary opportunities, it is most often reflected in the professional services that the organization offers and in the new programs being designed to attract financial support.

Research suggests that professionalization is one of the many strategies that an organization may employ when faced with challenges to survival (Jenkins, 1977; Zald and Denton, 1963). While ČSOP has elected to pursue this strategy to ensure its survival, the transformations taking place within the organization also demonstrate that this approach can, in fact, undermine some of the democratic ideals that associations may be seeking to achieve. Democracy and openness provided ČSOP with new opportunities. For instance, members now have access to international networks, ideas, and technology. At the same time, as the organization becomes more homogenous and emphasizes professional services, it is no longer home to a diverse array of environmental activists and perspectives, nor is it the hub of solidarity and camaraderie that it was in the past. In short, it appears that the transformation within ČSOP is eroding the norms of civic engagement, bonds of trust, and ethos of cooperation that characterized the organization under state-socialism. By extension, the lower levels of membership and emphasis on professionalization also suggest that a broader reduction of participatory practices in Czech society may be taking place.

The transformation of ČSOP, particularly the decrease in participation, should not be interpreted to mean that the types of state-sponsored organizations or



mandated voluntary action present in Soviet-style regimes are preferable to those found in most democratic systems. Rather, the findings suggest that an important opportunity may have been missed. After activists successfully challenged the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the 1990s became an era in which civil society development was viewed as essential to building new democracies (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000). While this approach to democracy promotion was notable, it often was insensitive to the unique social and cultural contexts of individual countries and, consequently, overlooked many potential ways to cultivate civil society (e.g., Mendelson and Glenn, 2002; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Quigley, 2000). For example, in the haste to create distance from the former regimes, donors often viewed state-sponsored associations with disdain or passed them by in favor of newer groups that they believed would be easier to support (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000). However, if democracy promotion efforts had targeted interest groups such as ČSOP, they may have been able to create conditions to aid the transformation of these organizations and reinforce the participatory practices in which they traditionally engaged.

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