

International Conference

Strengthening the triangle CSOs-National Governments-European Commission Reinforcing the Europe-wide civil society and building partnerships

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Discussion Panel 1

Impact of the financial crisis and the economic downturn on the civil society organisation (CSOs)

Wofgang Klotz, Director, South-Eastern Europe Office of the Henrich Böll Stiftung

Text of the Speech

Dear Colleagues,

when I came to Belgrade in March this year to work as director of the regional office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, of course I had to learn quite a lot of things – although my various jobs in the last 20 years made me work with and in Central and South-East Europe all that time. Yet the most astonishing lesson to be learned was about **CIVIL SOCIETY**, a term I hadn't heard as often in Germany during decades as I heard it in Belgrade in the first two weeks.

But it wasn't just the frequency. Lesson two started when I prepared an invitation campaign for our first series of public political debates in Belgrade. From my former job in Frankfurt I had brought with me some 3700 email contacts with people in Serbia, who once had registered for a user account at the Central and Eastern European Online Library. Such people – registering for a scholarly database on the internet – might be supposed to be somehow intellectuals. So I prepared a mailing campaign including all my contacts from Frankfurt for an invitation to these public debates in the famous Centre for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade.

This immediately raised the protest of my colleagues who tried to convince me, that I never should do that. "Why", I asked them. "But you have no glue what people that are!" "No", I said, "I don't need to know!" And when I asked them, whom they would invite, they gave me a first impression of the Heinrich Böll contact database in Belgrade, which consisted in - just the "Civil Society", i.e. the other local and international NGOs.

After three weeks I had learned, that speaking in the current jargon about Civil Society means the total or the community or the milieu of CSOs in Belgrade or in Serbia.

I would like to dedicate some 5 minutes to the question whether or not the term Civil Society is a tautology.

There are different concepts of Democracy and, hence, different concepts of democracy building. I do not want to rely on clichés, but I guess it is obvious to all of us that, for instance, Sweden and Italy represent different concepts of democracy within the European Union. And for me it's a strange and mysterious phenomenon that Sweden has a really strong commitment to our region, while I hardly know any Italian institution working here, except perhaps in Albania or Slovenia – and nevertheless the regional concept of democracy seems to me much more Italian than Swedish.

In the Swedish concept, roughly speaking, the society is just the society. If society succeeds to organise itself in a civic way, then it is a civil society – a civil society as a whole, including even those who do not share the social consensus on the way how it should be organised.

In our concept the Civil Society is a particular part of the whole society. It consists of the Civil Society organisations, which are no longer called non-governmental organisations, since, at a specific moment, the rather negative habit towards government had been replaced by the new term signalling more readiness for cooperation.

BUT: while the harsh separation from governmental action had been given up, a new exclusion tacitly appeared: by naming itself "Civil Society" this part of the society separated from the majority rest of society. Since then there is a clear distinction: we have

- Government
- CSOs
- And the silent majority

And many experiences I made since March in Belgrade and other places taught me, that the Civil Society considers itself as the active, the performing and transforming, shortly as the better (in which sense ever) part of the society – or: as the **ELITE**.

This again is a term that I rarely had heard in Germany (not to speak about Sweden again) while it is really omnipresent in Belgrade.

Yeah, you will probably answer, you have your democratic elite in Germany – well developed since decades and successfully managing state and society. Here we had – and still have – to build it up from the very desert sand. And so we come to the last one of the four magic words: **CAPACITY BUILDING**.

I would like to use this term to legitimate a reference to a really strong and comprehensive study our foundation is just going to publish. It's about the democracy building efforts in our region in the last 20 years, the achievements and failures, strengths and weaknesses and, first of all, the origins of such strengths and weaknesses. The author, Srdjan Dvornik, former director of the foundation's Zagreb office, started the field study two years ago with the preliminary title "Actors for Democracy". It will now be published with the title "Actors without Society". A telling modification, after all.

The first chapter of the study is dedicated to a deep analysis of the reasons, why – in the decisive historical moment – there was no social stratum in our regional societies able and strong enough to push the train of society on the new railway in the new direction. Even less: the collapse of the old regimes, he says, was not organised with a clearly developed idea in mind how this new society should look like and how it should be achieved, it just occurred because of the sclerotic weakness of the old model.

Yet Srdjan's diagnosis at the same time reveals the reasons, why the Civil Society here, different from Central European countries, developed as a kind of "parallel society" and lost (or never really gained) its embeddedness in the very core of the society. And then Srdjan includes a significant quotation of Žarko Puhovski, where he writes about the 1990ies or about this decisive period each society had to define its new way into future. Let me please repeat here this quotation:

"It is true" Puhovski says, "that farmers, managers, industrial workers, clerks and others used to have rather different problems and the corresponding needs in their lives; but in order for those needs to evolve into recognisable interests of social groups ready for action, the people in similar positions should be able to associate autonomously, to communicate about their needs, about difficulties they encounter, about possible causes thereof and the conditions for improvement. In short, a process of socially relevant awareness rising, without which needs do not turn into interests."

I would like to understand this *turn of needs into interests* as the very birth of a civil society, followed by the formation of such interests, their public articulation and – finally – their political representation. If this is right, then here the difference between the Swedish and the Italian concept might be found:

The latter would say that – once democracy and its institutional framework are implemented – the silent majority of the society will again tacitly follow the given new direction. Therefore this implementation of the democratic framework is the job to be done by elite, taking the responsibility for the passive rest of the society on her shoulders.

In opposition, the Swedish concept would say that *turning needs into interests* cannot give birth to democracy unless the interest-holders themselves are actively involved: they must organise themselves in order to make their interests politically relevant through public expression.

In this case the civil society must rise from among the *farmers, managers, industrial workers, clerks and others*. The civil society, therefore, can hardly be a community of professional representatives of civil society. This would in fact be the social tautology. Such professional representation of interests seems to me rather the final task of the parliament.

Yet, it's the Italian model which is mostly used as a pattern here. And it cannot work in our societies where still a lot of political and other stakeholders of backwardness enjoy much stronger embeddedness in society than we apparently can ever achieve.

The current crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina makes evident, how powerful they still are, and how they can successfully make use of such power against all the interests of the majority of the people, because these interests are still in the state of poor needs. What does it tell about our work in this country so far? We'll have to wait for the final appearance of Srdjan's study.

But when we speak about the crisis and the future standing and survival of what we call the Civil Society Organisations, then we – first of all – find ourselves in the midst of Polish ship-constructors, French farmers and German Opel-workers, and among their corresponding Serbian, Bosnian, and Albanian colleagues. All of them are facing the same crisis, similar cut-downs, and same threats of economic existence. And again there is a realistic perspective, that their needs will just remain needs.

Is there something that makes CSO's surviving of the crisis more significant, more essential than the survival of those countless members of the silent majorities, who always in the last 20 years had found their way to survive under unbearable circumstances?

I'm not sure. But I think if it's mainly our survival, we speak about, and then we might really be or become somehow actors without society.