

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE BALTIC STATES: AN ASSESSMENT¹

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Characterising civil society² in post-communist countries is not a job for the careless or the cautious, and the Baltic states present particular challenges because of their size and their history.

For a start, civil society did not arise phoenix-like in 1989. Dissident groups, although almost wiped out in the Baltic states during the Andropov repression of the mid-1980s, maintained a tenuous existence on the ground, and through their individual members' presence inside the Soviet penal system. Towards the end of the Soviet era, the dissident groups gained greater strength, as did new protest

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² I would adopt the broadest definition of voluntary organisations formal and informal. This, from the LSE centre for the study of civic society, is quite helpful.

“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 organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups”

groupings dealing with environmental issues. Umbrella organisations such as Lithuania's Sajūdis for a time included even non-political groups.

In Lithuania particularly, and to a lesser extent in Latvia and Estonia, the church maintained an independent space for intellectual and cultural freedom and for social organisation. Although subject to intense persecution at times, the church still represents the strongest strand in civil society with continuity back to the period of interwar independence.

The second and more controversial strand of this type is the organisations that were legally permitted, and even encouraged, by the Soviet regime. It would be a mistake to dismiss these out-of-hand as “part of the occupation”. In theory, they were under the tight control of the Communist Party, and they were certainly not independent in a formal sense, or often in any practical one. But on the margins, they sometimes provided a surprising amount of freedom of action and discussion. Groups for fans of astronomy and philately, choirs and orchestras, sport clubs and dance groups would sometimes enjoy brief (or even occasionally extended) periods of non-interference. The authorities' appetite for control usually exceeded its ability to enforce it. Scholars of the Soviet society sometimes refer to this as the “Grey zone”.

After the regaining of independence in 1991, much of the old Soviet “civil society” shrivelled and died. Some of it, such as the trade unions, took on new independent life and on occasion made a serious impact on public life. The dissident groups had largely transformed themselves into political parties. So did their allies in the cultural heritage and environmental protection movements. Deprived of the over-arching goal of regaining independence, umbrella organisations became more focused on exercising political power.

Some new non-party political organisations arose, chiefly to defend the rights of Polish-speakers (in Lithuania) and Russian-speaking non-citizens (in Latvia and Estonia). The church looked forward—mistakenly—to an era of renewed influence and authority. But that left a large gap, not yet filled: Western-style civil society has taken a long time to develop.

The author lived in the Baltic states in the period 1990-94, for most of that period as the managing editor of the *Baltic Independent*, an English language weekly. The staff of this paper were mostly young would-be journalists straight out of journalism school in Britain and America. They had all been trained to seek comment and analysis from NGOs, and found it baffling that none existed.

For example, on a story about veterinary medicines that had been illegally imported and sold as human pharmaceuticals, a reporter was unable to find any watchdog group representing patients, and no medical organisation was willing to comment. “That’s for the ministry to say”, one of the doctors involved stated.

Similarly, although consumer rights were regularly abused by bad products and service, failure to honour guarantees, etc, there were no consumer organisations to campaign on this issue. Students did not protest about bad teaching.

That’s changed. Civil society has now developed in a largely recognisable modern western pattern—at least among the speakers of the indigenous languages of the Baltic states. In both advocacy and social work, groups dealing with social and economic issues such as HIV/AIDS, disability, gender, age and so forth now cover broadly the same spectrum of activity and interest as in advanced industrialised countries, although often with sharply more limited resources. The landscape is similar, but the topsoil is much shallower.

Shortage of money is one of the salient differences, common to most post-communist countries. Business funding for civil-society activities is extremely limited, although high-income donors, particularly in Estonia, are beginning to make significant charitable contributions. For the most part, low incomes among the population and the lack of a tradition of organised giving to voluntary organisations mean that fundraising is much harder and less fruitful than in comparable western countries.

A second and related distinguishing feature is a disproportionate dependence on money from foreign sources, particularly foundations and the European Union. This has to some extent created the phenomenon of “Grantsuckers”—articulate individuals whose expertise lies more in gaining grants than spending them fruitfully.

A third difference is the stunted growth of civic society among the Russo phone population. Few members of this population group join mainstream civic organisations, while few parallel groups have developed either.

Some have attributed this to the predominance of “national” concerns (restoration of the predominance of the indigenous languages and cultures). This, it is argued, turned civil society into a form of national self-expression in which minority groups were necessarily marginalised. I see strong arguments against this view. The main reasons for apathy and alienation in the non-citizen population may be demographic structure, level of education and “Soviet” mentality of the kind explored by Richard Rose among others.

From the glory days of the initial phase of civil society growth in the Baltic states two very successful projects stand out. One was in book publishing. The small size of the publishing market in all three Baltic states means that publishing foreign books in translation is relatively more expensive than in larger countries. The subsidies to

publishers offered by the Soros foundations in all three countries created a high-quality academic and non-fiction publishing industry almost overnight. Publishers such as Baltos Lankos in Lithuania rapidly published a canon of standard western texts “from Plato to Proust”, which had either been previously untranslated, or in editions not suitable for modern use. This had big external effects on the education system, by providing affordable textbooks.

This had very little distorting effect. The commercial publishing houses were focusing on translation of foreign popular fiction, which continued to sell well. Foreign-language competencies increased sharply. The project has an exceptionally long half-life: once Plato (or Proust) has been translated well into, say, Lithuanian, the benefits can be enjoyed by many generations of students and scholars.

The second highly successful project was in giving small grants to scholars to travel to foreign academic conferences. These grants were not big enough to encourage significant corruption or to distort existing patterns of activity. At a time when academic salaries were exceptionally low, they encouraged able scholars to stay in intellectual life, and they provided a rapid and intense exposure to the currents of outside academic thought from which the Baltic states had largely been cut off during the occupation era.

A third example was the provision of computers and internet facilities, at a time when computers were relatively very expensive: average after-tax salaries for academics in 1994 were around \$100 a month, which was also the cost of maintaining a private internet account (charged at 30 US cents per kilobyte sent and received!).

The provision of free computers and internet access did not noticeably distort the private market, and greatly helped the creation of open and modern societies among people

whose incomes, because of the economic rigours of the transition from the planned economy, were rarely commensurate with their intellectual potential and capabilities

It is unlikely that such opportunities with such clear gains and low risks will present themselves again.

The future

Over the coming years, the withdrawal of the Soros foundation from much of its grant-giving in the Baltic states will give even greater importance to public funding. Some of this comes from the national governments, which are showing a growing willingness to recognise and cooperate with civil society groups. Estonia’s “Compact” agreement (EKAK) adopted by the Riigikogu (Estonian parliament) on 12 December, 2002, is the prime example of this. In some cases, non-governmental organisations are being used as partners in the provision of public services.

The other main source of money is the EU. However, this raises big problems. The EU’s grant application and monitoring processes are slow and cumbersome. This favours big NGOs over small ones, and bureaucratically competent ones over those that are merely visionary and effective.

As Susan Stewart points out in a forthcoming book³

It thus seems highly probable that the EU civil society direct link will remain limited primarily to a few powerful NGOs which correspond to the priorities set by the EU structural funds. Most local and the majority of national NGOs will stay more closely connected to domestic networks, be they governmental, corporate or community in nature. The hierarchy created by the EU

³ to be published in a volume edited by Jan van Deth (University of Mannheim) and William Maloney (University of Newcastle upon Tyne)

will have consequences for the internal functioning of the civil society sphere as well, since a few privileged NGOs have benefited disproportionately from accession.

Efforts to encourage NGOs to broaden their sources of funds, and to cooperate more effectively, such as Artur Taevere's organisation in Estonia (www.heategu.ee) are therefore highly welcome.

The task of civil society

Rapid economic growth in the in the Baltic states sometimes disguises the fact that politics is still immature, particularly in representing public wishes coherently. The biggest problem of all three countries is making public administration clean, efficient and responsive. Public services of all kinds still lag the richer countries of Europe. In this, civil society has a crucial, but so far unfulfilled role.

To illustrate the problem, consider the five main means by which state power is brought under democratic control. First, there are the political parties. Ideally, these are mass organisations which are responsive both to their membership, and to the views of the electorate. This creates two feedback mechanisms against inefficiency or maladministration. Politicians and party members alike want the electorate to see them as competent and far-sighted leaders.

Yet the political parties in all three Baltic states are small, weak and fragmented. Narrow economic interests, rather than broad political ones, are often their foundation. In extreme cases, they are the personal fiefs of powerful tycoons, such as Viktoras Uspaskich, the former leader of the Lithuanian Labour Party. It is ironic that funding political parties is the only form of donation to civil society that businesses in the Baltic states have adopted with any enthusiasm.

The second means is the courts. There has clearly been a great improvement in

expertise, speed and transparency since the collapse of communism, but there is still a long way to go. In theory, membership of the European Union creates an extra-national route for redress. However in practice, the legal system is still too expensive and inaccessible for most private citizens. **Improving public access to the legal system is one big remaining priority for outside civil society donors.**

The third means of control is the media. For all the improvements of recent years, the print and electronic media is still handicapped by the small size of the market. In the whole post-communist region, only Poland's market size allows for big editorial budgets. In the Baltic states few if any media outlets have the money for investigative reporting, foreign coverage, or specialist correspondents. Big advertisers often exercise a disproportionate influence on editorial policy. Many graduates see journalism as a route into the more lucrative and influential world of PR.

It is hard to see what outside donors can do to remedy this. Subsidising not-for-profit media outlets is unfair on the privately owned ones. The only substantial activity with ability to absorb donor money in a non-distorting way is media training. One possibility would be to encourage the growth of well-funded think-tanks, whose newsletters and journals would provide a niche for high-quality journalism and those who want to engage in it.

Fourth is external pressure. The prime example of this was during the process of accession to the European Union. But it continues through the requirement for public officials to meet counterparts and Commission officials. This creates a kind of scrutiny, and potential for embarrassment about bad performance, which is hard to substitute from elsewhere.

A fifth, indirect control on executive power comes from civil society, chiefly groups

specifically aiming to fight corruption, promote human rights and improve governance, such as Civitas in Lithuania. But to gain purchase on the political system, these need to be able to use one of the preceding four: the courts, media, external institutions or political actors.

In short, the main outstanding task facing civil society—the promotion of good government—is the one which is being least successfully pursued and in which it will be hardest for outsiders to help.

Donors' priorities

In my view, the time is now ripe for a rather tougher funding environment for civil society groups in the Baltic states and in most of the post-communist region.

Although there is a danger that good ideas will not be implemented, the danger of crowding out is even greater. With average incomes nearing \$1,000 a month, there is now scope for businesses, households and individuals to make voluntary contributions to the organisations that interest them.

The idea that “Soros will pay” or that the “EU will pay” militate against the growth of private generosity.

Experience in the post-communist world generally suggests that private fund-raising brings very patchy results: children’s charities find it very easy; those dealing with unfashionable causes such as mental illness or addiction find it almost impossible. But it is better to have patchy success than none at all.

Donors seeking to do good in the region should probably concentrate their efforts on the following.

1) Deepening and enriching the political culture by funding think tanks. These could be wholly independent, or attached to universities. The Carnegie Centre in Moscow is a stellar example of how outside funding can maintain an open-minded,

pluralistic and practical approach to policy and government in a generally hostile environment.

2) Funding organisations that help make civil society more effective—for example by training fundraisers, or helping NGOs use the legal system. The aim should be to amplify and magnify local efforts, but not to crowd them out.