

Great Expectations - Can Civil Society Tackle Corruption in Central and Eastern Europe?

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What is Civil Society

Civil society is more than the sum of citizens’ associations (which are themselves more than NGOs). Civil society constitutes a distinct part of the public sphere, parallel, but separate from the state. We have in this sector NGOs, trade unions, professional associations, chambers of commerce, student groups, cultural societies, sports clubs and informal community groups, even religious associations. All organised groups outside the state structure and trying to work on a non-profit basis for the general interest are a part of civil society.

The importance of this sector has had a vigorous increase over the years. In 1990 the size of the non-profit sector had reached 6.9 percent of the working force (12.8 percent if we include voluntaries) and had produced 6.4 percent of the GDP in the USA, [\[1\]](#) the country with the best development of the sector. Since then, the figure had risen. The prestige of civil society organisations (CSOs) is growing. Alexis De Toqueville’s *On Democracy in America* linked the strength of American democracy with the large number of citizens’ associations. In this vein Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba (*Civic Culture*) or Robert Putnam (*Making Democracy Work*) have stressed the importance of civic participation in strengthening democracy, giving implicit or explicit credit to CSOs. This prestige derives also from the noble goals pursued by those organisations: human rights and democracy, ecological concerns, social assistance, health, education, and so on. In Eastern Europe civil society had an even more appealing status after the collapse of Communism; at that time many intellectuals were seduced by the idea of subordinating the state to civil society, and civic unions attempted to take the place of political parties (without success, however).

Civil society as an anti-corruption fighter

Now it seems that CSOs may have another task: combating corruption. There is good reason to involve the civil society in this fight. Usually civil society’s greatest successes come in the domains where the state is too weak or doing too little: ecology, social assistance, human rights.

Some of the possible ways for CSOs to tackle corruption are:

- Developing public-awareness campaigns about the level of corruption and its consequences;
- Promoting a relationship with politics based on accountability (including freedom of information, public hearings of draft laws and transparency in the legislative and decisional processes);
- Implementing education programmes in order to increase respect of the law;
- Strengthening media oversight over governance.

Some of the above-mentioned activities have already been part of these organisations’ portfolio for a number of years. NGOs dealing with democracy/human rights have been making serious efforts to deal with the problem of accountability (especially transparency) for some time. The number of such initiatives is still low – in a report about corruption in Romania [\[2\]](#) there are only two such initiatives listed, both by the same NGO, ProDemocratia, one about the Public Awareness Campaign and one research on political parties’ funding.

Corrupt practices inside NGOs

There is concern regarding the existence of corruption inside civil society itself. It is clear that no sector can avoid such a widespread disease. There are many complaints regarding the corrupt behaviour of many NGOs. As their size and budgets are growing, the level of unethical practices also seems to rise. In many countries in difficulty, international funds are increasingly channelled through local NGOs that sometimes embezzle a part of them. In Bosnia and Herzegovina terms such as Mangos (Mafia-NGOs) and Quangos (Quasi-NGOs) are used, describing the behaviour of such corrupt organisations. In Romania for several years foundations were the best way to import second-hand cars. Sham NGOs can even be established by state officials or politicians in order to channel funds to their own pockets.

Unethical behaviour can occur even in authentic NGOs. Financial transparency and public accountability are not the general norm. A recent survey by CIVICUS [\[3\]](#) shows that civil society is not the paramount of correctness, but that there is a strong correlation between the civil society indicator and the Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index.

	Public availability of general information about CSOs	Financial transparency of CSOs	Perception of corruption cases among CSOs	Average civil society indicator	TI 2001
Canada	69	64	0	66.5	8.9
Croatia	39	20	58	38.9	3.9
Mexico	44	19	84	48.9	3.7
Pakistan	26	10	83	39.6	2.3
Romania	62	27	60	49.9	2.8
South Africa	65	46	0	55.5	4.8
Ukraine	58	26	62	48.6	2.1
Uruguay	32	11	84	42.3	5.1

In the Eastern European countries included in the survey, civil society seems to be less mature, with organisations prone to mismanagement and corruption.

Several causes may contribute to this situation:

- The financial reporting norms for NGOs are less rigorous than those for business;
- Donors (and much more, sponsors) have little power to control exact expenses (and certainly not the power to verify falsified receipts, if the organisations really did as expected, or to check against other possible fraud);
- Personnel practices are often distorted (personal relations do matter most);
- Democracy inside NGOs is not as it should be. In a group of freely associated people fair and timely elections should be routine. It is not the case in the majority of non-profit associations.

The capacity of Civil Service Organisations (CSOs)

A serious question arises: are CSOs able to deal with corruption, given that Central and East-European CSOs are considered to be: [\[4\]](#)

- poorly funded;
- over-dependent on foreign donors;
- concentrated almost entirely in the large centres of population;
- relatively unskilled;
- tend to oppose government rather than cooperate with it;
- not yet well enough organised to lobby effectively.

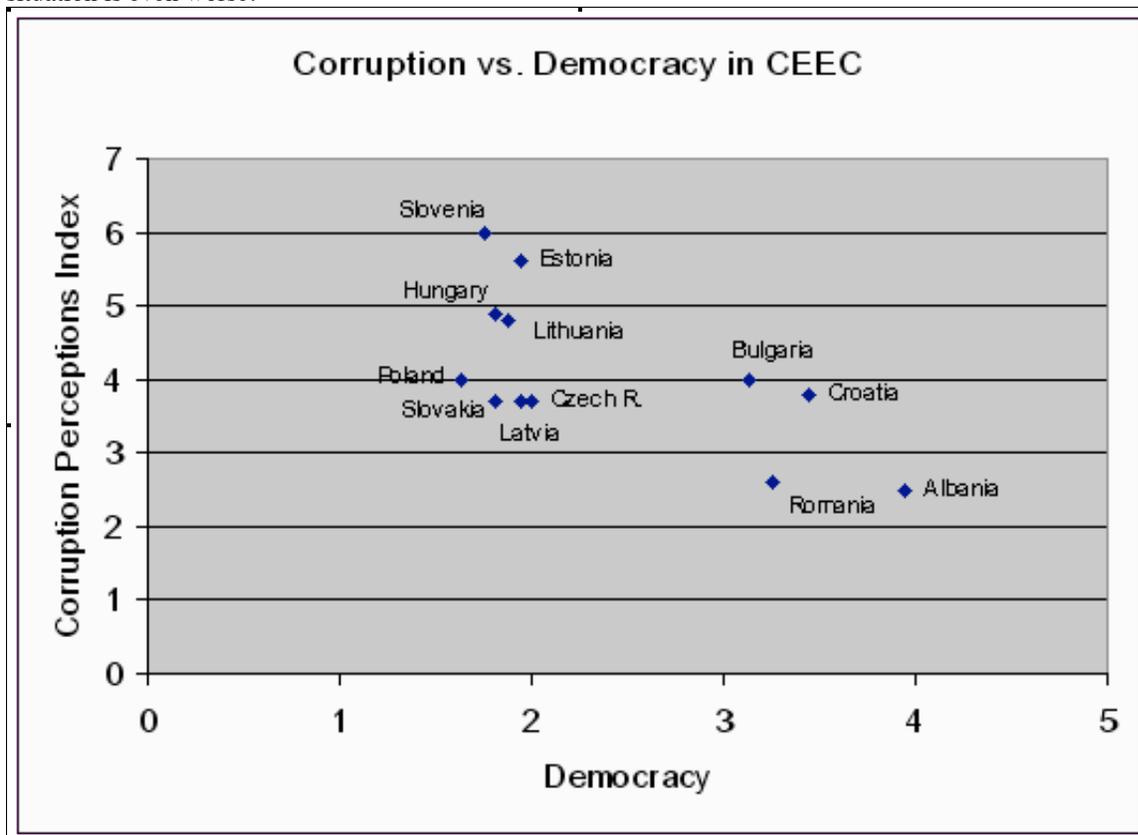
A donor-driven approach can make the organisations willing to apply for each source of funding, for each programme, without any regard to their capacity for implementation. NGOs can become more professional in attracting funds than in fulfilling a real need.

The influence of NGOs resides mainly among educated people, the same people who may be involved in civil society activities themselves. These people may be far from the more traditional part of society, in both a geographic and cultural sense.

Only a small number of organisations have good relationships with the administration or a good history of collaborations with these institutions – which seriously impedes their capacity to influence the state.

It is hard to assess the capacity of CSOs. Data about their activity or size are not available or not very reliable. As a hypothesis, civil society functions better in countries with greater democracy where it also works for the improvement of democratic institutions. We try to see the link between corruption (expressed by the TI Corruption Perceptions Index 2002, in which “ten” means clean and “zero” -- totally corrupt) and democracy (expressed by the Freedom House Score 2001-2002, “one” being the most democratic). The result is a significant correlation: more democracy means less corruption.

From the graphical representation below we can see a group of countries (Slovenia, the Baltic countries, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) that have a better situation: a good degree of democratisation, and less corruption. The picture becomes different when we look at other countries. Bulgaria and Romania or Croatia and Albania are struggling with corruption in a less democratic context. In the NIS (not included in the graphic) the situation is even worse.



Conclusion

Reports on corruption usually present different solutions for particular situations. The World Bank [\[5\]](#) distinguishes several types of solutions, depending on the level of state capture and administrative corruption. High state capture is usually associated with a weak civil society, cases in which civil society is the one to be helped, not the one who helps.

The available data indicate that civil society is a more or less exact mirror of society at large. Corruption is more likely to pervade civil society in the countries with higher levels of overall corruption, making civil society a poor instrument to tackle corruption.

The capacity for efficient action from the CSOs is greater in countries where democracy is better and corruption is less acute. In other cases the anti-corruption fight should be only a part of the greater effort to improve democracy. Certainly, civil society can contribute much to cure corruption, but not on its own. The lessons from the last decade of reforms in former Communist countries show that the best results can be obtained when the state is fully involved (and in this case foreign pressure is the most important factor) and working in the same direction as the entire

society. Political accountability, institutional reforms, better public sector management and a sound private sector should accompany civil society involvement.

Footnotes

[1] Lester M. Salamon, Helmut K. Anheier, “Social Origins of Civil Society: Explaining the Nonprofit Sector Cross-Nationally,++” Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project++, no. 22, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies, 1996, pp. 7-8.

[2] Open Society Institute, *Corruption and Anti-corruption Policy in Romania. Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Corruption and Anti-corruption policy*, 2002, pp. 469-470.

[3] Volkhart Finn Heinrich, “Transparency and corruption within civil society organisations,” in *Global Corruption Report 2003*, available here, p. 272.

[4] Andrew Crook, “European Civil Society or Civil Society in Europe?” The Sketch of a *Working Paper* for CIVICUS in Europe, CIVICUS European Regional Office, p. 4.

[5] *Anticorruption in Transition. A Contribution to the Policy Debate*, 2000.