

### A Shrinking Space for Civil Society? A Conference on Civil Society and Europe's Political Culture: Wrocław, Poland, October 2016

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# EUROPA BOTTOM-UP

ARBEITSPAPIERE ZUR EUROPÄISCHEN ZIVILGESELLSCHAFT / EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY WORKING PAPERS

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NINO KAVELASHVILI  
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PHILIPP SÄLHOFF  
MARIA SKÓRA

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## **A SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?**

**A CONFERENCE ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND  
EUROPE'S POLITICAL CULTURE  
WROCLAW, POLAND, OCTOBER 2016**

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### **A SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?**

A Conference on Civil Society and Europe's Political Culture  
Wrocław, Poland, October 2016

The conference was co-organized by the following organizations:

- **Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement**, a National Network for Civic Engagement, founded in 2002, that links 264 organisations and associations from civil society, business, and federal, regional, and local government bodies
- **Das Progressive Zentrum**, an independent German think tank on progressive politics and reform, founded in 2007 as a not-for profit initiative
- **Europejski Instytut Demokracji**, a Polish association, founded in 2013 in Wrocław, that aims to promote civic participation by mobilisation of local communities
- **Maecenata Stiftung**, an independent German think tank on civil society that includes the Maecenata Institute, a research and policy centre, founded in 1997, and Europe Bottom-Up, a European activities programme, first begun in 2011

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RAZEM SIŁAKO OBYWATELA



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WROCLAW 2016  
European Capital of Culture



## Contents

1. DIALOGUE ON EUROPE – Rebuilding Trust and Redefining Europe in Tough Times <i>by Philipp Sälhoff and Maria Skóra</i> .....	7
2. Conference Report <i>by Nino Kavelashvili</i> .....	12
3. Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrád Countries <i>by Anna Domaradzka</i> .....	23
4. Shrinking Space for Civil Society in the Heart of Europe <i>by Eszter Markus</i> .....	33
5. Postscript <i>by Rupert Strachwitz</i> .....	38

## **1. DIALOGUE ON EUROPE – Rebuilding Trust and Redefining Europe in Tough Times**

By Philipp Sälhoff and Maria Skóra

Due to the emergence of populist movements in many European countries, a sudden refugee influx, and North-South division arising from the economic and financial crisis, Europe has to cope with serious challenges, otherwise facing a threat of further disintegration. DIALOGUE ON EUROPE, a project implemented by Das Progressive Zentrum with the support of the German Federal Foreign Office, aims at countering those developments by bringing together representatives of the European civil society to work on visionary policy recommendations and foster trans-European cooperation.

The European Union has found itself in an unexpected identity crisis. Recent disintegrative developments have taken their toll on the concept of European integration and revealed a deep misunderstanding of what core European values are. Firstly, the economic crisis weakened the belief in the Community as a strong, united market player. The consequences of financial turmoil turned out to be a tangible memento of persisting inequalities between and within European societies. The Greek crisis, with its political, economic and sociocultural consequences, was a sad example of a growing alienation and detachment of the Member States.

Not much later, the migration challenge proved it even worse. Unprecedented in its numbers, the influx of refugees from Africa and the Middle East challenged not only European solidarity towards the

“gateway” countries, like Greece and Italy, but also revealed how fragile liberal democracies can be. Anti-immigrant discourse brought about the rise of populist right-wing parties, like UKIP or Alternative für Deutschland. Direct political effects reached beyond the Visegrád Group vetoing refugee relocation quotas proposed by the European Commission and breaking the idea of solidaristic Europe. To a great extent, the political crisis of the EU added fuel to the fire during the Brexit-referendum. It seems that when neglected, the challenges ahead of Europe piled up and are now too profound to be addressed by high-ranking politicians attending closed-door summits only. There is a rising lack of trust and belief in Europe within the societies, also among the youngest generations. Reviving civic engagement, meaningful interest in politics and the feeling of European ownership is urgently needed. Sustainable solutions can best be achieved with the support of a strong and well-connected European civil society.

Anticipating these hardships, in 2015 Das Progressive Zentrum launched DIALOGUE ON EUROPE – Rebuilding Trust and Redefining Europe in Tough Times<sup>1</sup> in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office. The project initiated a two-year-long transnational dialogue process with young, promising thinkers from European countries, such as France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Germany. In order to initiate it, 5 Town Hall Meetings, subsequently held in Athens, Lisbon, Rome, Marseilles and Madrid were organized to gather the “movers and shakers” of the national and local levels in one place.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/>

More than 500 young, dedicated people from civil society, the media, politics, academia and business joined the events that featured not only lively workshop debates, but also public discussions with Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office, giving the opportunity to openly ask questions about the most pressing European challenges.

This process, which has already won the media attention of Politico<sup>2</sup>, Der Standard<sup>3</sup> and other national channels, successfully brought together key actors dedicated to fostering a climate of mutual understanding between the participating states and societies. On the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016, during a conference in Berlin, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier officially launched the second phase of the DIALOGUE ON EUROPE project<sup>4</sup>. Nearly 100 contributors and partners formerly engaged in the Town Hall Meetings joined the event, marking an intermediate milestone of the project. They are currently developing genuinely European policy recommendations in four Thinking Labs<sup>5</sup> focused on Populism, Social Cohesion, Migration and Integration, and Sustainable Growth. These working groups benefit from the exchange of ideas and experiences of people based all over Europe. Geographical distances are not barriers, as most of the work is done virtually.

Selected focus areas are crucial for the future of Europe. The Thinking Lab on Populism is dealing with one of the fastest growing phenomena

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.politico.eu/article/friendless-germany-launches-southern-charm-offensive-angela-merkel-minister-of-state-michael-roth-portugal/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://derstandard.at/2000036582743/Es-braucht-europaeischen-Dialog-ueber-Europa>

<sup>4</sup> <http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/dr-frank-walter-steinmeier-what-kind-of-europe-do-we-want/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/category/thinking-labs/>

in modern European politics. Well known in other parts of the world, such as Latin America, the concept of populism is still ambiguous. Some experts and journalists characterize as populist such heterogeneous political movements as the Spanish left-wing Podemos or far right protest movement Alternative für Deutschland. The Thinking Lab strives to bring clarity into the debate and identify not only the basis of this phenomenon but also counter-measures to tackle it.

The Thinking Lab on Social Cohesion is engaged with one of the main factors of discontent within the European Union: the increase of economic inequalities and its consequences for social cohesion and European integration. This Thinking Lab is ambitious to identify both current critical developments and appropriate solutions to the social consequences of the global economic crisis. The Lab looks into policy arrangements at national levels, whilst tracking global developmental tendencies at the same time.

The Thinking Lab on Migration and Integration focuses on one of the most burning EU issues. Within one year, based on diverse experiences that Southern European countries and Germany have so far gathered, the Lab wants to deliver a genuine European perspective on migration and integration policy. The concept of “people on the move” rather than “refugees” or “migrants” remains the center of the debate.

Last but not least, the Thinking Lab on Sustainable Growth aims at providing guidance to just transition models and inclusive economic growth in Europe. Sustainability is a broad concept, looking much further beyond environmental movements. To be successfully

implemented, it has to be tackled with a cross-sectoral approach, incorporating topics such as energy policy, innovation, digitalization, social security and national debt policy. Through cooperation of those international teams, DIALOGUE ON EUROPE strives not only to deliver concrete policy recommendations, answering the most pressing challenges for Europe, but also to contribute to more understanding and civil engagement across the European Union.

Responding to the latest political developments, the project recently included Great Britain and Poland as focal countries. The Brexit-referendum as well as tensions between Poland's new government and the European Commission cannot be ignored when discussing the future of the European Union. Thus, two additional Town Hall Meetings - in Warsaw and in London - will give insight to the national debates and might be a chance for understanding the roots of the latest dissatisfaction with the European Union and its values.

All topics mentioned above are on the agenda both in Brussels and in the member states, however official political summits hardly ever have an immediate impact. Thus, DIALOGUE ON EUROPE aims to involve real actors of change in Europe: civil society and its extensive networks. More than ever Europe needs strong social engagement to enhance civil participation in reforming the European project. By delivering innovative policy recommendations and establishing a sustainable network of young thinkers and practitioners DIALOGUE ON EUROPE will contribute to a bottom-up reintegration of Europe.

## 2. Conference Report

By Nino Kavelashvili

“It is not always the same thing to be a good man and a good citizen.” (“Nicomachean Ethics”, 325 B.C.) – even if Aristotle’s conception of the citizen is widely different from the modern conception, the debate on this issue remains highly topical, as the current discussion about European values and European civil society demonstrates. “What kind of civil society for what kind of Europe?”<sup>6</sup> What role does and ought civil society to play in EU policy-making?

The questions of what it means to be (a good) “European” and to act according to “European values” come up regularly in many European contexts especially now, when the image of Europe is marked by the notion of deep crisis. The affects of the financial and economic crisis as well as the handling of the influx of refugees from conflict areas in Europe’s neighbourhood challenge European solidarity and cohesion. At the same time, national movements and populist positions are arising everywhere in Europe. And, not least, the Brexit provokes a fundamental rethinking of Europe’s future. It is the values and prospects of a European civil society as well as its needs to grow and foster that have to be brought into this debate.

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<sup>6</sup> Beate Kohler-Koch (2009): The three worlds of European civil society – What role for civil society for what kind of Europe? URL: [http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~aburgin/IREU%20438%20Policy%20Making%20in%20the%20EU/Additional%20Readings/Additional%20Reading%20for%20students/Kohler%20Koch\\_The%20three%20worlds%20of%20European%20civil%20society.pdf](http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~aburgin/IREU%20438%20Policy%20Making%20in%20the%20EU/Additional%20Readings/Additional%20Reading%20for%20students/Kohler%20Koch_The%20three%20worlds%20of%20European%20civil%20society.pdf)

With its value-based model of a democratic and solidary community, civil society as societal force and expression of a political culture has the potential to pinpoint ways out of this European crisis. But do we understand this in the same way all across Europe?

Firstly, the conference was to be a dialogue in order to identify and foster mutual understanding of the developments, constitutions, and identity of civil societies in different European countries and also connecting visions and concepts to develop common approaches to strengthen a political culture in Europe borne by civil society. It should highlight, support, and strengthen the impact of civil society actors in different fields of action. Secondly, the conference was to take place in the frame of the European Capital of Culture Wrocław 2016 and create a room for exchange and understanding for civil society stakeholders, academics, and representatives of the political level from Poland, Germany, and other European countries.

Wrocław, as this year's European Capital of Culture, has been chosen as the best place to organize such an event. For Wrocław 2016 is a "time and space to discuss the metamorphosis of culture – past, present and future" (official website of "Wrocław 2016"<sup>7</sup>). The need to include the role of civil society as the driver for a value-based approach to political culture into this debate and programme.

The Tadeusz Mikulski Lower Silesian Public Library at the Market Square (Rynek) at the centre of the city was the venue, where on 20th-

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<sup>7</sup> About ECOC, URL: <http://www.wroclaw2016.pl/about-ecoc>

21st October 2016 the event “Europe Bottom-Up: Civil Society as Political Culture?” took place in the frame of the Wrocław 2016 European Capital of Culture with friendly support of the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation and the Goethe Institute. 30 participants from different European countries and organizations were represented at the event in order to drive forward cooperation and discuss and Europe; its integration challenges, representative democracy, political culture, and European civil society and its characteristics in regional comparison.

### **Day 1: Mapping Civil Society**

The Director of the library, Andrzej Tyws, as the host of the event, welcomed all guests in his opening statement and highlighted the relevance of the international cooperation and multicultural approach that is crucial for Poland, for Wrocław and even for the actors working on the local level. According to him, the slogan “Read the World at the Multicultural Library” is not only just a wish, but a lived reality and the leading idea for the library hosting this event.

The title of the conference, “Civil Society as political Culture”, was the subject of the impulse-speech by Adam Chmielewski, Professor, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, starting his presentation with a definition of civil society beyond its often reduced concept of the so-called Third Sector: non-governmental organizations, NGOs, or, civil society organizations, CSOs. To him civil society essentially refers to a spontaneous or bottom-up activity of individual citizens and groups who try to achieve some aims they see as beneficial for themselves or society,

“without expecting the state or other public agencies to do it for them”. On top of this he presented ten points, addressing the explanation as well as justification for the decline of the public activity of citizens in most liberal-democratic countries. In doing so he suggested possible solutions for this “major crisis” as well. According to Adam Chmielewski, fostering intellectual, practical, and imaginative capabilities, or more precisely, promoting education, development of skills, and nurturing sensitivity are three wide-reaching tasks which are inevitable for the empowerment of the citizens.

This last point was also taken up by the next speaker Jarosław Fret, founder and leader of Teatr ZAR and presently the Curator of Wrocław 2016 European Capital of Culture. Jarosław Fret highlighted the importance of the understanding of the freedom of speech and the right to express oneself. He reported about the project “MiserArt”, “a zone of culture in a labyrinth of exclusion”, dealing with the problems of exclusion from cultural participation, and self-exclusion based on social problems in the case of homeless, disabled, etc. people. He presented the “Witness/Action”-concept and pointed out that performing art is not only about aesthetic categories, but also about an ethical perspective: With different participants in every performing situation such as performer/actor and recipient/spectator, each performance marks a process of witnessing as an opposite to passiveness. This term refers to the active civil society as well, since “a witness is a person who never falls asleep. Even a citizen can fall asleep.”

“The freedom of speech and expression is not a gift, which is guaranteed under all political and historical conditions. Once you have received it,

you have to use it every day. You could not and should not give up on these rights or give them to other people, we cannot waive our fundamental rights” said Markus Meckel, the last Foreign Office Minister of the GDR and current Board Member of the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation. Markus Meckel referred to the responsibility of individuals towards society: “You cannot be free alone. (...) There is no democracy without action and movement, but this does not mean that civil society is every time against the state.”

After those rather general and conceptual inputs in the first part of Day 1, the focus of the conference was put on facts and figures about civil society and its framework conditions in selected countries.

Anna Domaradzka from Warsaw University presented comparative research results<sup>8</sup> on civil society in the four so-called “Visegrád Countries” Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, dealing with the question of where and what kind of research on civil society has been and is being done, who is doing it, and where the gaps are, similarities and challenges they face, with a special focus on Hungary and Poland – two countries, where the best “Third-Sector-data” are available.

Eszter Markus, a public policy and communication expert from Hungary, reported on the current status of civil society, worrying about the new developments in Hungary, where the government “has a clear

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<sup>8</sup> Domaradzka, A. (in print). State of Civil Society in Poland, in: Christian Schreier (Ed.), 25 Years After. Civil Society in the ‘Visegrád Four’. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.

strategy to bring the civil society to silence. (...) Or we can talk and nobody is listening to the citizens.”

The following part of the conference that was moderated by Ansgar Klein, Executive Director of the BBE since its foundation, aimed to carry out a safe and open discussion to reflect and express what all the participants as civil society actors from different countries face in their everyday working lives. Ansgar Klein raised the question of the values of the civil society. What makes a society become a civil society?

In Markus Meckels opinion, values of the civil society are very important but not the crucial point, because people have different values. Diverse groups do have widely varying agendas and they all belong to the civil society. Regarding this, we have to address the whole society and make the rise of populism and right-wing extremism the subject of discussion, without a differentiation between “good” and “bad” or “the dark side of civil society”.

The absence of trust is a crucial problem for Poland as well, as one of the participants mentioned. According to Adam Chmielewski, there is one essential motor of the civil society: It is empowerment. “You want to support civil Society? Then help people to become agents!”

In the discussion the deteriorating condition of civil engagement was voiced. “Public agoraphobia”, withdrawal of citizens to the private sphere was identified. On the other hand, concerns over the shrinking spaces – limiting the activity of independent, non-governmental organizations in some countries, like Hungary or Turkey – were raised.

Thus, a general question emerged: What values and what conditions are fundamental for civil society to exist?

Secondly, radicalization of the political discourse that helps radical citizen movements enter the mainstream was diagnosed. In consequence, we face a dilemma that nowadays a distinction between the “good” and the “bad” actors of civil society could be employed. Such differentiation, based on their approach to the Western model of liberal democracy is controversial though, and raised questions to be considered on the following day: Can one censor civil engagement in response to its critical approach to the European values? How to tackle it without aggressive confrontations and rising destructive dichotomies? What are the reasons behind the growing discontent and re-nationalization of public sphere and civic engagement?

By the end of the first conference-day, participants got the opportunity to enjoy an evening city walk, guided by highly motivated young people, volunteering for the European Cultural Capital 2016. While walking through the streets of Poland’s fourth-largest city, volunteers told the group of participants about the city, which is located in the heart of Europe and is considered to be one of Poland’s best preserved historic cities, with a remarkable international history, and a new widely recognized dynamism. It is one of three biggest academic hubs in Poland, with public and private universities hosting more than 130.000 students every year.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Further information about universities and students in Wrocław, URL: <http://www.invest-in-wroclaw.pl/en/key-data/education-and-knowledge/universities-and-students/>

Wrocław “has a story to tell...a story which is unusual, tragic and intriguing.”<sup>10</sup> Thanks to volunteers, group could explore the city by means of myths and legends about Prince Henry and Bishop Thomas, who hated each other, started to build a church together, could not agree on the name of the church, and finally built two churches on the same spot – the double church; the story about the strange stone head, frozen in a silent scream on the south tower of the cathedral; the story about the dumpling gate as well as about dwarves, scattered around the city of Wrocław and being the symbol for an anti-communist underground protest “the Orange Alternative’s” in the 80s and 90s.

## **Day 2: Promoting Civil Society**

“I have come to the conclusion that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.” With this quote by Charles De Gaulle, Mirko Schwärzel, head of the European Department by the National Network for civil society (BBE), opened his presentation on “Europe and the integration challenge”.

Maria Skóra, Senior Project Manager at Das Progressive Zentrum, presented DIALOGUE ON EUROPE<sup>11</sup>, the most recent international project of her organization. This project aims at communicating a practical idea of how to engage civil society in the policy-making processes and to close the gap between the world of politics and social engagement by turning mistrust into inspiring cooperation:

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<sup>10</sup> About ECOC, URL: <http://www.wroclaw2016.pl/about-ecoc>

<sup>11</sup> Dialogue on Europe, URL: <http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/>

The project initiated a two-year-long transnational dialogue process with young, promising thinkers from European countries such as France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Germany. This process, which already gained significant media coverage met more than 500 young, dedicated “movers and shakers” of the national and local civil society during 5 Town Hall Meetings, subsequently held in Athens, Lisbon, Rome, Marseilles and Madrid. The events featured lively workshop debates and public discussions on the most pressing European challenges with Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> June 2016, in the “Europasaal” of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier officially launched the second phase of the DIALOGUE ON EUROPE Project. More than 300 people from all over Europe joined the event. These selected representatives of the European civil society are now developing genuinely European policy recommendations in four DIALOGUE ON EUROPE Thinking Labs focused on Populism, Social Cohesion, Migration & Integration and Sustainable Growth.

“Where is the Citizen?” was the title of the speech given by Steve Austen, permanent Fellow of the Felix Meritis Foundation. According to him, citizens are not represented by the NGOS. That’s why he started his first “MoNGO” (“My Own NGO) when he was 22 years old. After that he continued establishing informal and formal civic initiatives and networks in the field of culture, science and citizenship. In his opinion, non-governmental (NGOs) and quasi autonomous non-governmental (quangos) organizations as well as “MoNGOs” are “competitors on the

20

market for influence, power and commercial or political interests”. He is strongly convinced that every citizen has to change the natural status to the legal one in order to be able to struggle for own principles, due to the fact that the “natural person is nice, but has no power”. The “re-discovery of the phenomena of the MoNGO” is a promising sign for Steve Austen: “Is Europe entering a new period of Enlightenment? If so, I hope to be part of it, just like you.”

The event was concluded with a panel discussion, moderated by Rupert Graf Strachwitz (Maecenata Foundation) and joined by Adam Chmielewski (The University of Wrocław), Anna Domaradzka (Warsaw University), Ansgar Klein (Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement) and Katarzyna Młyńczak-Sachs (Wrocław 2016 European Capital of Culture). After a lively discussion about the role of volunteering, civil education that “does not only mean a knowledge, but also experience” (Ansgar Klein), non-formal learning, Brexit as “symbolic of the empowerment that does not really represent people” (Katarzyna Młyńczak-Sachs), and financial aspects, since “without money there cannot be a combination between talking and doing” (Anna Domaradzka), participants could present just one point that they consider as the most important one.

According to Katarzyna Młyńczak-Sachs, the most important is interpersonal contacts: “That’s how it starts to build civil society.” For Anna Domaradzka it is a new research agenda with the focus of analyzing the impact as well as creating the space and level to meet. Culture, but not very ambitious projects, could be the one of the important space for

it: “I do not want government only to listen to the people like me, but also others who do not believe in Europe, who are frustrated.”

Eszter Markus spoke about “changing the narrative” and Rupert Strachwitz considered the “rebuilding of trust” as crucial.

In the opinion of Adam Chmielewski it is the empowerment: Knowledge, skills, sensitivity, and showing the people that they are able to take care of themselves. Why is it important? “Because it catalyses involvement. It helps to make things that are impossible.” Civic involvement is the only issue that makes a European Cultural Capital possible. In the sense of one of the campaigns, presented by Adam Chmielewski: “Is Wrocław the European Capital? – That depends. – On you.”

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### 3. Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrád Countries

By Anna Domaradzka

With every political shock of the recent months, the question of what has become of civil society in Central Europe remains more valid than ever. We tried to tackle this issue in the framework of the research project “Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrád countries” coordinated by the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society. The goal was to conduct a comparative analysis of the state of civil society in the Visegrád countries, and determine the greatest needs of the civil sector 25 years after the transformation. To address the main question we used the existing data and conducted in-depth expert interviews and focus groups in all four countries. The results of the study were widely described in two Maecenata publications (“25 Years After” book, 2015; “Civil Society in the ‘Visegrád Four’” eBook, 2014), offering contextual data as well as general reflection about the state of civil society in the region.

What makes the analysis of V4 interesting, is the shared post-communistic heritage, but also a great diversity in terms of values, tradition of social engagement, as well as the economic and political situation in the last 25 years. Importantly, countries of the region are still less wealthy than the EU average, both in terms of GDP, as well as in terms of resources available to different civil society initiatives.

After 1989, the growth of civil society in the region was taken for granted – it indeed flourished for some time, as one of the ways to express long suppressed civil rights and freedom. Therefore, there was no strategic effort to regulate or support the development of civil society, apart from

US foundations programs financing the “rebuilding of democracy”. However, after EU accession the civil society development was placed highly on the political agenda. The European Commission pushed for a change in terms of requirements for participatory governance and democratization of decision-making processes. As a result, the majority of projects aimed at strengthening civil society and mobilizing citizens in the last years were financed from EU funds. Sadly, this seemed to hinder the internal capacity of the sector that soon became dependent on the external funds as well as ideas concerning its role in the society at large.

Other factors influencing the development of the sector in the region are low levels of social trust and relatively low levels of civic participation (at least according to the official records treating participation in CSOs as a main indicator). Although we do observe professionalization in some areas, in general the civil society in Central Europe is still based on voluntary work. One of the reasons being the financial instability stems from the lack of long-term resources.

While the moment of regaining independence in 1989 was the start of several years of dynamic development of civil society initiatives and new organizations, recently, a lot has been said about the sector’s stagnation and the closing up of existing institutions. Weak human resources and low financial management capabilities of existing organizations made them highly dependent on public money and vulnerable to changes in political and economic situation. Also, the relations with local governments are rather underdeveloped in the region. While CSOs are often welcomed as cheap sub-contractors of public services, real

partnership or co-production is much less common. On the positive side, we observe the growing know-how and networking capability of the sector, as it matures, following the path similar to other EU countries.

What shaped this unsatisfactory development was the lack of long-term state policy focusing on civil society development, but also the absence of inside reflection on the sector goals and ways to meet future challenges. Therefore, the third sector often drifted where the money was, instead of looking for diverse ways to obtain some level of sustainability. That's also why EU accession in 2004 had a very visible effect on the sector, creating the “distended stomach” effect, stimulated mainly by the European Social Fund transfers into the sector. Those processes resulted in what was called “a third sector instead of civil society” (Wygnański 2014) or “an empty shell” (Markowski 2012). Namely the NGOisation of civil society, accompanied by relatively low level of engagement and weak citizen skills among wider society, but also low trust toward institutions and organizations as a response to their growing fossilization.

While the post-communistic heritage played a role in civil sector development in the region (with 1989 marking a “re-start moment” for civil society initiatives, banned for 45 years by communistic regimes), right now the problems that the V4 civil sphere face are very similar to those of other EU countries. Governmentalization, commercialization, fossilization and mission drift – all those processes, observed west from our region, are very much our reality now. On the larger scale, an important factor shaping civil society is the recent socio-demographical shifts. Growing inequalities, low birth rates, and migration trends,

together with increasing urbanization, created a new context of civil society development, and lead to the emergence of new needs and new groups of active citizens, while alienating others. On top of that, all V4 countries faced the crisis of the welfare state, slowly replaced with the corporate state, with governments seeking to develop their country in cooperation with global investors' money. This was accompanied by neo-liberal politics and New Public Management rhetoric, resulting in the dominance of market logic and a lack of long-term planning in the public sector.

In other words, in terms of public services and benefits, the region was strongly impacted by both market and government failures, resulting in shortages of welfare services and a growing number of people with unfulfilled needs in terms of housing, childcare, social security, health services, etc. This in turn created a potential for mobilization of angry citizens, often manifested through support for similarly angry populist politicians, as well as diverse forms of engagement on the right side of the political spectrum, including initiatives and groups that are conservative, nationalistic, militant or religious in nature.

On the other hand, the economic and democratic transformation brought about a growing interest in neighbourhood and local issues, most visible in the form of urban movements, grass-roots initiatives and neighbourhood groups<sup>12</sup>. This form of mobilization, most characteristic for the liberal middle class residents of urban areas, often remains

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<sup>12</sup> Data on urban initiatives was gathered in the framework of the project "City revival – from planning to grassroots initiatives", financed by National Science Centre, DEC-2013/09/D/HS6/02968.

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unaccounted for in official statistics, as it lacks the typical third sector characteristics.

As in case of both above-mentioned phenomena, we can say that in general the social engagement in the region does not always fit neatly into the definitions commonly applied to civil society. A wide range of activities is informal in nature or organized around ad hoc initiatives as well as local problems. This trend becomes stronger as the third sector loses its legitimization. We can even talk about some form of NGOisation backlash, where organizations are criticized for being increasingly self-serving and so dependent on public money that they don't dare to question the status quo. As a result, a growing part of civil effort consists of privatised or individualised struggles aimed at fulfilling the needs of citizens in the context of government and market failures (eg. urban/neighbourhood movement, parents' movement).

In terms of strengths and weaknesses of the civil sector in the region we can say that from the one hand it seems to have a higher potential for innovation and a lot of untapped energy available, however it is weak in terms of legitimacy and efficiency, especially comparing it to western EU countries. Only the study of the Czech Republic mentioned a rise of trust, whilst the other three countries noted a rising distrust towards political institutions that led to distrust in the organized civil society (Hungary), a general lack of social trust (Poland) or a reserved attitude of the public towards the third sector (Slovakia). Other problems include the weak sectoral identity, the weakness in the professional management of CSOs, the inconsistent regulation of the third sector, or problems with transparency.

In Poland, the third sector infrastructure, supporting non-governmental organizations is well developed, but less so in other V4 countries. Main “umbrella” actors (eg. Klon/Jawor, BORIS and Splot) study the third sector and civil society, diagnose the condition and needs of the sector to design better ways to support these types of initiatives. Existing network organisations disseminate information and knowledge among civil society actors, as well as lobby for legal solutions, strengthening their potential and regulating their operation. While still under-financed, it has a big educational as well as advisory potential, much needed in all V4 countries.

In terms of the recent developments in the region, strong tensions between the public sector and non-governmental organizations emerged, visible both in Hungary and Poland, where governments, supported by the media, try to undermine the position of organizations that do not support the new political order. This makes the issue of civil society’s political role more relevant. While some authors (Skrzypczak 2015) make a clear distinction between civil society and political society, other (Surmacz 2015) stress the need to overcome the reluctance of social activists to become politically engaged, daring them to “reclaim” the politics from the professional party players. Perhaps the growth of activity based on the informal commitment, is also an attempt to escape the deepening crisis of trust between the public and the non-governmental sector? However, this is a crisis, which – as would Surmacz suggest – may also become a source of renewal of the social activists’ ethos, through positive politization and unification around

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shared values, which are sometimes forgotten in CSOs struggles for survival.

The eruption of diverse and innovative forms of civic activity can be observed in the region. Those informal initiatives can be characterized by their focus on the perspective of the “here and now” and the lack of interest in the structures of civil society. Skrzypczak and some other authors (Mocek 2015) suggests that changes in this area stem from a series of post-modern transformation in terms of both individual and communal life, including the democratization of private life and the acceptance of asocial behaviour in the name of respect for individual freedom. In this context alternative forms of civil activity emerge, creating the “net-worked individualism” that manifests itself in a variety of new social initiatives like new locality or community practices and ad hoc mobilization (Skrzypczak 2015).

Observed for several years, the phenomenon of spontaneous grassroots self-organization also represents a new, autonomous way of thinking about social and civic participation. Urban movements, food cooperatives, the neighbourhood initiatives or self-help groups operate in the same space of social life as the third sector. As Bogacz-Wojtanowska writes: “The joint action, trust, voluntary nature, common good, coming from below and searching for support – those issues are clearly identical, showing definitely the same roots.” (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2015: 200). However, for this community-sector to become a real partner to the public sector a change in the public management model is needed – mainly the departure from the new public management model to a good governance model. In the current

situation this shift seems to be possible only at the local level, as that good governance is based on networking, consulting public decisions in a framework of multi-stakeholder partnerships, including with citizens who are not formally represented by any organization.

To stimulate change in policies, a new approach from the sector's side is needed. Up to now, the sector's approach to self-development was rather defensive and reactive, lacking initiative and deeper reflection. As Frączak (2015) underlines, in the last 25 years CSOs have focused mainly on adapting to the changing state policy, abandoning the watchdog function and focusing instead on complementing the activities of the state in the area of social welfare. In other words, the transformation of the sector was primarily the result of the public sector demand for certain services, not the result of a conscious decision of the leaders of the civil sector. In Poland, recent works around a "Strategic Road Map of Civil Sector Development" signify an attempt to develop the sector's own vision of development, so as not to surrender to out-side pressure, but write its own scenario for the further.

Meanwhile, social initiatives and their critical attitude towards non-governmental organisations are likely to affect a significant transformation of the CSO sector, as they propose a different, bottom-up mechanism for the formation of a citizen activity, which may be an autonomous complement to the mainstream public spirit. Diffusion of this social approach will perhaps revive the spirit of civicness and launch a broader debate. While it would go too far to call those initiatives a beginning of a new civil sector, we can see them as space for innovation, new ideas and social practices, creating added value for the whole sector.

In terms of recommendations, there is a need for more reflection on the roots of non-liberal forms of mobilization that reflect the political changes in the region. This calls for in-depth studies of the right-wing forms of social engagement, often ignored by researchers as not a relevant part of civil society. Also, if we want to have a full map of the civil society in the region it is important to look behind the numbers and stop counting the civil society organization. Focusing on formal third sector activities obscures the fact that there is a lot more going on in terms of civic engagement, in relation to old and new social problems. This energy, coming from below, often not organized and coming in short-term bursts, seems to be a new facet of civil society that challenges the rest of the sector to re-think their strategies. More frequently in recent years, it also takes the form of nationalistic, anti-liberal or conservative initiatives, which illustrates another cleavage between the traditional civil society structures and some new forms of mobilization. This energy may either fuel up more frustration and division in the society or – if better understood – may result in deeper reflection on real needs and problems of different social strata.

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## 4. Shrinking Space for Civil Society in the Heart of Europe

By Eszter Markus

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) recently published an 84-page report entitled “Hungary: Democracy under Threat – Six Years of Attacks against the Rule of Law”<sup>13</sup>, in which it summarized several of its concerns on the developments in Hungary during the governance of the Orban governments (2010-2016). It gave an overview of seven areas in the rule of law where negative tendencies became tangible: the constitutional framework, the judiciary, the legislative powers (incl. the electoral system), freedom of media, freedom of information, freedom of religion and civil society. Even by looking at this long list of areas we should be extremely concerned. Some might say, though, that – unfortunately – this is not some peculiar thing happening in one country, but a world-wide trend. Sadly, that is also true. However, the geographical, political and historical situation of Hungary makes it a forecast barometer, which should trigger an alert to Europeans.

In order to decide if the claims are true or not, one might read through the 84-page study that supports these claims of growing restrictions of democratic space and compare it with the one-page press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As Hungary Matters, the English edition of the state-controlled Hungarian News Agency’s newsletter summarized the release “The [FIDH] report said the government had

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/hungary\\_democracy\\_under\\_threat.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/hungary_democracy_under_threat.pdf)

‘systematically’ weakened and established control over the state’s judicial and legislative branches, the media and civil groups.”<sup>14</sup> The government had no intention to deny the statements in detail; the press statement simply says that Orbán was elected prime minister during the elections of 2010 and 2014, so no one can claim the government’s decisions are illegitimate. The government has the support of the people of Hungary, thus “it will protect the interest, safety and rights of Hungarians even if some international organizations that claim to be human right defenders do not like this.”<sup>15</sup>

In a way, if you do not have the time to read the FIDH report, it is enough to think through this summary of the government release. First, it made it crystal clear that once (or twice) a government is elected there is no legitimate basis to argue against their decisions. Second, based on the previous argument, there is no need to listen to voices that contend any government action, given that legitimacy was given to the government alone. Sounds familiar to you, dear reader? It does sound alarmingly similar to many Hungarians echoing the propaganda of the “People’s Republic” of the 1950ies.

Hungarian civil society was (re)born in the second half of the 1980ies after the law on foundations was adopted, and later the law on associations was modified allowing the proliferation of civil society organizations free of political control. In the next two decades we witnessed the birth of numerous CSOs, NGOs, voluntary organizations,

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.mtv.hu/images/download/hungary\\_matters/2016/afternoon/hm1104pm.pdf](http://www.mtv.hu/images/download/hungary_matters/2016/afternoon/hm1104pm.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.kormany.hu/hu/kulgaszdasagi-es-kulugyminiszterium/hirek/magyarorszag-visszautasitja-a-fidh-ragalmaid>

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etc. While many organizations were quickly registered, the attitude of the people changed more slowly.

After forty years of communism and forced membership in youth- and trade associations, it took more than ten years to consider association-membership something that we voluntarily choose. It took even more time to understand that if you give donations to a charity or you offer to work on a voluntary basis it will make you feel better, and that working collectively for some cultural, social cause is – after all – a noble thing. We still need time to realize that we ourselves bear responsibility for our neighborhood and our society, and we should not always be waiting for an authority to solve our immediate concerns. Though there are nice exceptions, civil courage is still hard to find. For twenty years between 1990 and 2010 we tried really hard to change our perceptions, habits and practices with regard to our relationship with the government and the ruling elite. We still try, but it is as difficult as rowing against the wind.

The old reflexes have been revived, and old proverbs reappeared: Least said, soonest mended. Money talks, bullshit walks. The financing of CSOs has changed in a way that practically only those get (substantial) funding who are loyal to the government. The total volume of state support to civil society has decreased in nominal terms. The police raids to leading independent NGOs lacking a solid legal basis in 2014 – as it was revealed just recently – were ordered by PM Orban himself. Since then many freedom-fighter, human rights and fund re-distributing organizations had to go through several unscheduled legal and tax investigations. Fear became tangible for many: it was not the feel of

compunction but the fear that one can be punished for not being loyal, for not remaining silent.

Social dialogue bodies, including a high-level tripartite forum with unions and chambers and dozens of councils and boards, were part of the communist institutions, and were further developed after 1990. The notion of participatory democracy, which asked for more than consultations in committees; namely involvement, had slowly but steadily got stronger, especially after the 2004 accession of the European Union. Practically all of these institutions were re-structured, reorganized, or shut down in the last six years. Partnership was replaced with the notion of a “National Cooperation System”, which means that the government and its institutions maintain social dialogue with selected civil organizations. Representativity, professional record, or other tangible condition are no longer required to be included. Many well-known civil society organizations that had proven professional records were no longer invited.

In view of the above – casting a worrisome look at Western countries that once set the standard for civil society development in 1990ies and now favoring authoritarianism and becoming nationalist – one can be deeply worried that the political culture in civil society would be no better than the political culture in the country. In the case of Hungary, we need to find another model for civil society. Each CSO needs to build up their grass-root supporters and their membership base and find novel ways to form their constituencies. Luckily, in this century we have internet-based solutions like social media and collaborative platforms and have the prospect of digital social innovation.

The political culture of civil society organizations will depend on their ability to embrace new forms of communication and get support from our networked society. I hope this may eventually mean less state support and stronger partnership with society.

## 5. Postscript

By Rupert Strachwitz<sup>16</sup>

“Politics is too important to be left to politicians.”

It was Markus Meckel, a politician, who said that when delivering a key note address in Wrocław in October 2016, albeit one who had been an activist in what may be described as one of civil society’s finest hours before he became East Germany’s last Foreign Minister in 1990. At that time, civil society in Poland, Hungary, East Germany and what was then Czechoslovakia as well as in many other countries of Central and Eastern Countries wrote history. Today we are faced with a shrinking space for civil society, as governments are attempting to curb civil society action by regulation, harassment and infringement on civil and human rights.

Given this scenario, it seemed more than timely to come together and discuss the relationship between civil society and political culture. Wrocław, the vibrant European Capital of Culture 2016, seemed a perfect place to do so, and a number of Polish and German organisations joined forces to set up a conference small enough to have an intense debate, and yet diverse enough to allow for different points of view to be put forward. The two days were well spent in trying to fathom out the position of civil society today and the tasks that lie ahead of us.

After 1990, it had been hoped that a new world order might be created after the end of the Cold War. This did not happen. As Anna Domaradzka

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<sup>16</sup> Rupert Graf Strachwitz is the Executive Director of the Maecenata Foundation.

pointed out, the welfare state was replaced by the corporate state, market logic entered the public sphere, and no effort was made to render the 1989 civil society hype sustainable. In Western Europe, governments failed to realize the value of a strong civil society for the development of democracy; they concentrated on promoting capitalism and staying in the driver's seat without realizing they were losing power to the business sector. This, with other reasons, led to the total erosion of citizens' trust in the political establishment.

While Polish colleagues pointed to serious threats in their own country, what Eszter Markus reported from Hungary was shattering. The systematic closing of the space for any civil society action not in line with government policy in a member country of the European Union should be a grave concern to all Europeans. Nobody can be sure such developments will not be seen in Western Europe. Alarming, voices are being heard not only talking about a post-democratic era, but actually embracing it. Capitalism without democracy seems to work in China, so why not elsewhere? Against this backdrop, Steve Austen's insistence on the legitimacy and legal status of the European citizen as laid down in the Lisbon Treaty appeared even more relevant. To accommodate minorities, ethnic and cultural groups, and indeed civil society organisations is one of the most important aims of this clause in the basis document of the European Union. Its enforcement is at risk!

So what is the way forward? Clearly, not only democracy, but society as a whole is in crisis in Europe. Controls, security mania, competition, and a petty power game have replaced trust, civic values, respect for one another, a cooperative spirit, and a sense of common goals and direction.

People everywhere associate this with the traditional political elites, and refuse to take the political successes in bringing the Europeans closer together into account. Increasingly, and alarmingly, they are falling for populist slogans and leaders set on turning back the wheel of history. It is high time for those citizen's to take on the responsibility, who are determined to face the real challenges of our time. It is time for civil society to take the initiative, set the agenda, and develop the arguments needed. Civil society as a pluralist bottom-up experience must become the blue-print for a new political culture. To this end, civic education and civic empowerment are of essence. For unlike the state that comes to you, and the market that tries to come to you, civil society does not. It depends on the citizens themselves to take action.

This is no mean task. Not only is civil society perennially underfunded. It is also undergoing a period of re-birth, from formal to informal, from institutional to social movement, from subservience to government to an independent arena. Yet, looking at Europe, its spirit has only survived through networks, personal relationships and interaction of citizens – in short, by building and, time after time, rebuilding trust. Therefore, it would seem that the sorely needed new political order will only be created and only achieve sustainability if it embraces a participative approach and actively engages in the everlasting discussion on what needs to change to promote the common good. To this end, relying on the political mechanisms of the 19th and 20th centuries, will not suffice. A new political framework, a new political culture will have to emerge from the crisis. A small group of people assembled in Wroclaw from Poland, Germany, Georgia, Hungary, the Netherlands, and the United

States, easily agreed with Adam Chmielewski<sup>17</sup> when he said “Civil Society surges in crises!” It is to be hoped that he will be proven right.

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<sup>17</sup> The paper Adam Chmielewski gave on the occasion of the Wrocław conference, titled “Bonding or Bridging? Empowerment as a Task of Civil Society Activism” is published separately as No. 12 of the Maecenata Foundation’s OBSERVATORIUM series:  
<http://www.maecenata.eu/images/MO-12.pdf>





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