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# DEVELOPMENT OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY OF THE VISEGRAD REGION

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“Modern society was formed in the age of great revolutions which brought a relatively autonomous individual and on the other hand a whole integral structure of a modern social system.”<sup>1</sup> Jan Keller states in his last work that the development of society has caused “gradual emancipation of the individual from outdated relations of a community type. This has become a significant feature of modernity.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the modern society also goes through gradual differentiation of the single component of the society. Keller, together with other sociologists, evaluates the developmental processes as a desirable demonstration of modernization but simultaneously warns against possible negative consequences.

The present phase of civil society was not gaining its popularity and potential so easily. The addition of sociological meaning in the form of the existence of institutional pluralism is more useful than the return to ideological traditions it has come from. It is not possible to explain the term itself through the comparison of antinomies or different understandings in the framework of an ideological spectrum. Its understanding in the background of its historical and philosophical development is essential because of the complexity of existing societies.

We can be very grateful for the rediscovery of the term civil society, especially to societal and political conditions that rose from the development of society in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier, any person engaging in the concept of civil society would have been considered a historian, mainly because the term itself did not evoke anything lively and useable. However, thanks to the reasons mentioned above, it was rediscovered and has become an ideal. The reasons are

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<sup>1</sup> Keller, J.: Dějiny klasické sociologie. Praha: SLON, 2004, s. 435

<sup>2</sup> tamtéž, s. 435

easy to explain. The state of society that this term is connected with has become much appreciated and politically attractive. It was not possible to talk about the existence of a working civil society in many countries. People began to perceive this lack and we can say that it began to hinder them.

Totalitarian regimes cancelled the separation of society from state, it subjugated the civil society to the state and excluded the validity of many rights and freedoms existing before the state and being independent on it. "In this extreme form of political society, the societal organisations were not the autonomous expression of interests but the additional tool of their amelioration and supervision. Therefore the restoration of the autonomy of the individual and civil society has become the main task in preventing the expansionism of the state, though it does not express that such a danger is connected only with state, because its source also exists in a civil society. State can then only be used as a kind of power instrument. Therefore the restoration of civil society also has this qualitative dimension—it requires the restoration of democratic citizenship and civil virtues."<sup>3</sup>

The absence of the existence of civil society was experienced particularly in strongly centralised societies, the sole political-economical–ideological hierarchy of which did not tolerate any competitor (rival, competition) and the only one concept defined not only the truth but individual morality as well. As a result "the rest of the society approached the state of atomisation and a dissident became the enemy of the people and the regime."<sup>4</sup>

In such a situation the need arose for a new ideal, which was re-established in the idea of civil society, in the thoughts of institutional and ideological plurality preventing from the establishment of power and truth monopoly and balancing the working of state institutions willing to gain monopolistic position. What is hidden under the term civil society? The simplest and also the most comprehensive definition of civil society comes from Ernst Gellner:

"The civil society is a complex of non—governmental institutions that is strong enough to function as a counterbalance of the state; while it leaves the

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<sup>3</sup> Šamalík, F.: *Občanská společnost v moderním státě*. Doplněk, Brno 1995 s. 146

<sup>4</sup> Gellner, E.: *Podmínky svobody (občanská společnost a její rivalové)*. Praha: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 1997, s. 7

state the function of peace guarantor and arbiter of fundamental interests, it prevents it from atomising the rest of society and gain control of it.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless this definition is not sporadic. Sociologist Jürgen Habermas continued the sociological concept of liberalism that established an interpretation of civil society on the idea of a human as a self—confident subject purely following laws connected with the social contract.

“Civil society is the summary of interpersonal relations, rules and duties arising from this agreement.”<sup>6</sup>

The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of political thinking characterises civil society as an evolutionary stage of society that is synonymous with the term of political society. In its later meaning it is perceived as a societal and economical arrangement of principles and institutions standing out of the state framework referring to so-called non—political aspects of the present societal order.<sup>7</sup>

Slovak political scientists and authors of the Short Political Science Dictionary characterise civil society in the following way “the term has been used in social—political theory since the 18th century to define societal and in the narrow meaning proprietary conditions. Under the influence of natural—juridical theory, civil society was recognised as the consequence of natural qualities of human and governmental forms and morality. The present politological literature differentiates between political society, meaning the area of public power and state coercion, and its foundation—civil society as the summary of non—governmental institutions and social mechanisms.”<sup>8</sup>

Different individual approaches of authors, ideological views, historical development and action in different political systems have pointed out the dissimilarity of the definitions. Primary assumptions of existence and identification signs remain the link of any interpretation. A democratic political system is the fundamental assumption of the existence of civil society.

<sup>5</sup> Gellner, E.: Podmínky svobody (občanská společnost a její rivalové). Praha: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 1997, s. 10

<sup>6</sup> Bělohradský, V.: Říkejmi si: Pokus o definici intelektuála. In: Literární noviny, 22.12. 1994, č. 51-52/1994, s. 5

<sup>7</sup> Miller, D. a kol.: Blackwellova encyklopedie politického myšlení. Barrister & Principal, Brno 2000, s. 67

<sup>8</sup> Tóth, R.—Krnó, S.—Kulašik, P.: Stručný politologický slovník. Bratislava: UNIAPRESS, 1990, s. 50

So we can interpret civil society as the space around individual interests and public solidarity. The individual has the potential of self-realisation through associations, churches, economic associations, trade unions and independent groups. Civil society presents the space for people to learn how to participate both in power and tolerance.

Polish political scientist Mielecký characterises civil society as an instrument to reduce the space of state operation, which at the same time makes the political system itself active by influencing the decision—making processes, rules of functioning, ways to realisation. Simultaneously it defines conditions for its existence and development: “the standard operation of civil society and its development is conditioned by the level of democracy of the political life of society and of cultural interaction with the political system.”<sup>9</sup> The civil society could in these conditions be defined as “the sphere of human existence standing outside from the immediate influence of state power and has been more and more constantly used as the characteristics of the community of sui juris sovereign citizens who are able to fully take a part in democratic production and control of state power, as well as the societal and economical organisation, principles and institutions standing outside the state framework, referring to non-political aspects of the present society order.”<sup>10</sup>

According to another view “civil society presents the range of organisations of public interest whose main task is to modify the existing social—political structures.”<sup>11</sup> These organisations of public interest presents an asset in the process of the creation of the society structure, the creation of a political system and public institutions as well as in the process of dividing authority and decentralisation of power. So in the conditions of the present democracies it is “the establishment of the so-called third sector which is outside the formal state apparatus because it realises the needs of the citizens and at the same time has an influence on state authorities thanks to recognition of the citizens’ needs and supervision of state realisation of those needs.”<sup>12</sup> The third sector, as understood

<sup>9</sup> Lysý, J.: *Občianska spoločnosť*. In: Kolektív autorov: *Politológia*. Nitra, Enigma, 2003, s. 69

<sup>10</sup> *tamtiež*, s. 70

<sup>11</sup> Gažiová, A.: *Tretí sektor ako základ formovania občianskej spoločnosti*. In: *Politické vedy na prahu tretieho tisícročia (monografické štúdie)*. Nitra: UKF, 2001, s. 199

<sup>12</sup> Feťková, G.: *Ochrana právneho poriadku a práv občana*. In: Kresák, P. a kol.: *Občan a demokracia*. Bratislava: MRG-Slovakia, 1997, s. 169

by Gabriela Fet'kova is created by non—governmental corporations, its aim being to “teach people not to rely only on state help but to work to implement his /her own needs as well as the needs of the whole of society.”<sup>13</sup>

We can observe the miscellany in the development and understanding of civil society through examples of its present creation in the countries of the V4 Region.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC—Czech political scientists in the discussion about civil society pay special attention to analysis of the problem of the purpose of its existence. Dualism has appeared in this discussion: on the one side are the conservatives (with the present Czech president Václav Klaus at their head), who perceive this discussion as the discussion of the ability of effective governance, while on the other side stand the group (represented by the last federal and the first Czech president Václav Havel) which perceive this discussion especially as the “issue of authenticity in politics. Discourse has made from the political decisions and views ordinary clichés which evoke in the citizens false expectations about what politics is able to give them.”<sup>14</sup> The initiatives as Impuls 99 (Impulse 99) or Děkuje, odejděte (Thank you, go away) were at the end of 20th century the most significant activity of Czech civil society. In the course of analysis it is necessary to remember that they did not accomplish the basic characteristic feature—to work as a counterbalance of the political system. “An effort to directly influence the political sphere was their specific feature. They exemplarily persuaded that if there are not exactly defined limits and the relation between politics and civil activity”<sup>15</sup> the existence of civil activities, initiatives and associations could not be effective. On the other hand, it is necessary to mention successful civil initiatives such as Manifest spisovatelů politikům (Manifesto from writers to politicians) from 1917 or Charta 77 (Charter 77). Despite the first one being written in wartime and the second one in the time of normalization, their influence on the political scene was not insignificant. Although they lost their influence after some years, it is necessary to remember them. “Both civil initiatives entered the magnetic field of politics thanks to its success. We can thank them that they graphically showed us their differences as

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<sup>13</sup> tamtiež, s. 169

<sup>14</sup> Žák, V.: Spor o občanskou společnost. In: Pocta Františku Šamalíkovi k 80. narozeninám. Praha: ASPI, 2003, s. 319

<sup>15</sup> tamtiež, s. 333

political parties. While in a working political party there has to exist a central authority able after discussion to go and act together, the civil initiative, because of the lack of such an authority, is never able to decide to do anything. And, if it can, the solution becomes split at its first conflict.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Czech civil society is typical of its interconnection with politics, which makes it impossible to work effectively in the modern understanding of the civil society as the counterbalance of the state. The depth of its incomprehension is not only historical, but also stems from the attitude of the public. In spite of that, in searching for development since the 1990s we have to say that even so civil society has been developing and has taken the right direction to reach rational and effective operation according to the examples of developed democracies.

Another example of the development of civil society is the REPUBLIC OF POLAND. In the Europe of the 1990's a transformational wave was passed off which changed the conditions of the political systems of the Central European countries. Poland was the first country to start the transformational wave in the Central European region, thanks especially to its civil society, which started to be active. The movement Solidarity, whose activities came from below, is especially well-known. It had come into existence few years earlier and for its activities in favour of the citizens its activities were prohibited by the governing Communist party. Regardless of this, the movement continued to work and in 1989, also thanks to the position of the Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecky, contributed—a first in Central Europe—to the deposition of the authoritarian regime and to the establishment of democracy.

The first relatively free and partly democratic elections took place in 1989. The civil movement Solidarity reached not only its aim—economic and social rights for the working class—but also markedly contributed to the establishment of a democratic political system. Simultaneously it showed to other countries that civil initiatives arising from above and united by a common aim are effective and do not prevent their activity from solving the initial conflict. For further explanation we have to add that Solidarity associated people with different ways of thinking (left oriented, radicals, right oriented, conservatives as well as liberals) with a common aim. Civil society built on such a principle becomes the

<sup>16</sup> Žák, V.: Spor o občanskou společnost. In: Pocta Františku Šamalíkovi k 80. narozeninám. Praha: ASPI, 2003, s. 333

equal partner to the state institutions and alongside to this it creates the space for all citizens to participate in public power.

In HUNGARY the third sector (with a narrower comprehension of civil society) restored its activities in 1987 when the new Foundation and non-governmental organisation act was adopted. These organisations significantly help to adopt the law of associations and their rights in 1989. Nowadays in Hungary there are approximately 60 thousand non-governmental corporations with nearly 400 thousand volunteers<sup>17</sup> (the highest number in the Visegrad region). Based on the law there actors of the civil society work in the form of organisations, foundations and civil associations. There is a need to stress that the state and its institutions can find some types of organisations. That was the way in which the state determined limits for the existence and operation of the civil society. The law concerning new organisations was adopted in 1993 and the Public Service Act in 1997. At the beginning of the '90s also the state supported the development of civil society, establishing a 1% tax contribution. This contribution created the better space for citizens to contribute to the operation of the civil society.

Civil society in the Hungary of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterised by dualism derived from the founder of the single civil associations (10% of non—governmental corporations and associations were founded by the state). Civil society has now become too polarized. Modern trends which include legal economical regulations, rights and duties of non—governmental organisation have resulted in the third sector today being able to unify only in the area of the same interests. The solid unit, which could be an equivalent partner in the communication with the state and fill up the gap between the citizens and state institutions, is not so easy to create. To begin with, it is necessary to clearly define the space of civil organisations and associations, to define the role of the civil society itself and to set an economical and legal framework for existence.

Civil society in the SLOVAK REPUBLIC has developed within similar dimensions to those in the other countries of the Central European region. It has reflected development in the Czech Republic in many points; the difference is in the more active attitude of Slovak citizens towards civil service. The common campaign before the Parliamentary elections in 1998 was the manifest demonstration of

<sup>17</sup> The Visegrad Yearbook 2003. Budapešť: CESPO, 2004, s. 193

operation of civil society after several years. Thousands of volunteers took part in the campaign OK'98, accepting the help of foreign observers and financial resources. This campaign produced the first creators of non—governmental organizations and first founders of civil associations. Slovak civil society is characterised by the high rate of decentralisation as regards the number of activities they concern themselves with.

We can also see the trend of deputing power as existing in civil associations. They operate specifically at the regional level and fill up the space between the authorities of regional local government and their citizens. On the other hand there exist civil associations that operate working countrywide. These are often, in many cases, equal partners with state authorities, for example as special consultants in the new law preparation process (members of non—governmental organisations were members of working teams preparing the law dealing with conflict of interests, amendments to the Political Parties Act, etc.).

Contemporary modern civil society in the Visegrad region countries particularly reflects the principle of creating initiatives and civil activities from below, coming directly from the citizens and their needs. The civil society should also be created in this sense at the European level and to represent the needs of the member states citizens against European institutions.

## Conclusion

19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe is for the most part characterised by the existence of centralised states which despite their power monopoly were not able to prevent disintegration of society. Segmented society was created as the alternative to the state and as an internal opposition to state power. Its objective was to influence within the system, but the state started to fight against the new segmentation phenomenon. It created the basis for separation of civil society not only from the state, but also from state instruments and institutions and for the formation of a new society order.

Civil society is based on the separation of the political establishment from economic and social life, in combination with the absence of the power holders' domination over social life. On the other hand, political centralism is necessary because economic and social units are not able to take over state institutions' role in guaranteeing order. As regards political control, the economic system



requires pluralism. Economic autonomy is needed, not only for reasons of efficiency, but also to ensure pluralism at its society base. Ideological and intellectual pluralism is required for the effective working of civil society.

In this way, civil society is becoming a strong element of new society systems created on the basis of dissolving socialistic establishments. It is represented by a complex of associations and institutions strong enough to avoid state tyranny. Every member of society has the opportunity to enter associations and to leave them at any time without suffering any consequences.

Civil society created in changing conditions in Visegrad region's countries is characterised by bottom up development. The actors are civil associations operating at a national level, but also ever more present at the regional level. The objective is to fulfil the gap in communication between citizens and states with civil institutions. In many cases their operation is limited in financial resources.

We can see differences in the development of civil society in the Visegrad region, depending on historical and social conditions, economic situation, cultural mentality and civil involvement. The first state starting "the revival" of the civil society in the above-mentioned region was Poland. The success of the civil movement Solidarity supported the idea of civil society restoration and its active role in changing society in former Czechoslovakia and in Hungary. Particular differences can be seen in participation in civil society restoration, in the structure of its members, in legislative framework and other determinants of its existence. Common signs are observable in civil society perception as the counterbalance to state institutions and possibility the implementation of all civil activities in public life.

In the case of the creation of the European Union as quasi supra-national union, civil society is starting to have a new dimension. Its function has changed; present informal existence is alternated by formal co-operation within the European Economic and Social Committee. Many questions arise: in which way civil society will develop, how it will develop in changing conditions, and how co-operation will be implemented after the elimination of barriers created by the borders of the member states.

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