

Civic participation in the development of the political institution in Central and Eastern Europe

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The comparison with the situation before the changes that occurred 11 and 12 years ago is one the first thing that comes in mind once the term "civic participation" is used in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) context. And understanding the political institution as the field of activity where State and parties meet greatly adds to this perspective. Of course, as everyone knows, during the socialist regimes in the CEE countries, the State and the party meant the same: both in what concerns the recruitment procedures and sources and the decision-making process. Yet, starting with the early '90s, the region underwent impressive political changes – due to both the nations' desire to escape their past and their efforts to join the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance. The question regarding the civic participation's role in the changes that occurred during the last decade has its importance: if civic participation played a negative part, or if it became less present during the last years, it would mean that all reforms were carried out only due to the will of a politically influential minority, supported by the West's financial aid and know-how. The current essay aims to show what were the most common forms of civic participation in the region, and, most of all, how efficient they were.

Forms of civic participation

Civic participation is defined by the existence of two dimensions: involvement on the one hand, and integration on the other. As for the current discussion, involvement refers to the citizen's will to participate, while integration acts on the more objective level of the society's extent to which it allows participation. It also has to be mentioned that including the State and the party system in the category of political institutions doesn't fill in for the definition: The political institution is defined by the existence of a statute, the targeting of a social need, the public area as the place for all activities and the decision-making process as the key for answering the aforementioned social need. Keeping these traits in mind, we can move on to taking a closer look at some examples of civic participation, starting with direct involvement.

The most common form of direct involvement is, of course, the electoral process. A mature strata of citizens capable of analyzing and choosing between political offers, measured by how flexible the party system became after the changes at the beginning of the 90's, is probably what most people associate with "civic participation" *.

Direct involvement is linked to the extent at which the state allows it's citizens to enter or to use it's very structures and thus to have an important role in influencing key-decisions: as a criteria for indicating civic participation, direct involvement has to be measured also according to the objectiveness by which the State recruits it's personnel or by the number of legislative initiatives (such as changes in the Constitution) directly supported by the citizens**.



Other examples of civic participation are related to the independence of some key components of the democratic societal system, such as the press and the non-governmental sector. Of course, in order for these to be real indicators of the level of civic participation, they have to be independent, influent in the decision-making process and, above all, representative.

Being representative is, unfortunately, only rarely the case of the press in many of the CEE countries. The press might even reflect on short term periods trends and opinions contrary to the majority's or to it's main body of readers point of view, with one reason for this being the role that private ownership of big media trusts plays in the content of many newspapers: It also often happens that such giant trusts are controlled by *foreign* investors, only certain points of view being allowed to be published in the newspapers. This is the case of Yugoslavia and, at a lower extent, of Romania. But other regions also face this issue: In Poland, 56% of national publications and 50% of the regional ones are owned by German enterprises.

*: The second half of the 90's brought some political changes in Poland which prove to some extent that the electorate is capable and interested in changing it's political choices: the end of president's Walesa mandate and the confirmation of A. Kwasniewski, the overall complexity of the party system (compared to that in other CEE countries) are some of the clues of a strong system.

**.: The Romanian Liberal Party claims it collected some 600.000 signatures (1999-2000) in support to its plan to change the Constitution.

As for the NGO sector, in most of the CEE countries it is probably more representative than independent. During the recent years, local branches were supported with huge amounts of money by their mostly Western mother-organizations*, these branches distributing afterwards the money among other NGOs. Still, this fact doesn't necessarily prove the lack of independence of the CEE civil society, nor the extent at which Western organizations control the CEE non-profit sector: it is more the sign of the low self-sustainability of Central and Eastern European organizations.

Developing civic participation. From trade unions to parties

All examples reflect the rate of the citizens' interest in politics and their support and confidence for the present political systems, while the aforementioned rate is one of the best ways to understand civic participation nowadays. The forms of civic participation changed a lot during the recent years: at the end of 1989, the fall of communism due to the support received by dissidents from the population was a great example of civic participation. But since a certain level of stability was achieved in most CEE countries, civic participation changed, and the above-mentioned examples are signs of a different reality that the one that produced the events at the beginning of the '90s**. The involvement of citizens is still present, although not as direct as it was a few years ago. Nowadays the concept evolved also in the CEE region from direct involvement to including a strong element of representation. In order to illustrate this, we have to take a closer look at organizations influent enough as to determine the decision-making process while still maintaining ties to certain parts of the population, capable of supporting and backing their actions. The first type of such organizations that comes in mind is trade unions. They're present in many CEE countries, and in some cases they have kept their influence (as most of them continue structures established during the socialist regimes), while improving their level of representation***. Yet other evolutions also occurred: in Yugoslavia, trade unions are powerless, while inside the Baltic States they lost most of their influence.



fluence by being represented through organizations, even if not in the form of unions: it's the case of the Slovenian Agricultural Association and the Farmers' Party in Poland, or the Yugoslav Otpor movement. Many of these organizations first started as NGOs, later transforming their structures in order to become political parties. The influence of such organizations has always been linked to their level of representation, disappearing as soon as they lost the support of their public, as seen in Romania in the case of the Students' League. But once they ensured that they would be truly representative, such organizations got enough power as to leave the non-governmental sector and try to take part in the decision-making process. Still, this isn't the mainstream trend among parties from CEE countries. Parties are usually established on their adhesion to different ideologies more than on the representation of a specific part of the public. Once the ideology has been selected, parties try to gain the support of the electorate that would benefit the most from supporting these ideologies, the setback consisting of the fact that the public and even party members hardly know what the official doctrine is about. Instead, parties, founding their actions on representing only certain groups (such as parties supported by trade unions or founded by professional/ethnic/religious groups), definitely have a more stable electorate – even if never as big as in the case of standard parties. Yet the electorate's size disadvantage was often surmounted by establishing coalitions or pressure groups influent enough as to determine politics in countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The unions: a question of perception

As to the importance of building strong trade unions inside the CEE countries, few people actually still believe in it (among them, the author of the article). It is hard to tell whether or not trade unions are still regarded, by the majority of the vast CEE public, as one of the last signs of a long-gone "communist" tradition. Still, it is known that in some cases, as in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and even Poland (despite of the Solidarnosc's great example), an important part of the intellectual elite still portrays the trade unions in a negative way. Trade unions have been made responsible

But other professional groups also gained in-

*: Between 1995 and 1996, a violent debate started regarding a governmental legislative initiative targeting the sources of NGO-funding in Slovakia. NGOs responded by regrouping around The Third Sector association and initiating protests.

**: Civic participation in the form of public meetings and demonstrations is not yet extinct: recent demonstrations in Yugoslavia during the last year, which led to the fall of Milosevic and his regime, and the "miners' raids" in the spring of 1999 in Romania are two examples of the same category. An interesting fact regarding these two examples is the position of the media and the NGO sector: during the events on the 5th of October in Yugoslavia the NGO sector was one of the initiators, while some of the national publications and all of the foreign ones supported the demonstrations; in Romania, the "miners' raids" were condemned by both Romanian and foreign press and the NGO sector.

***: This is the case of Romania, where unions evolved to one of the greatest forces the government has to deal with when implementing its policies. But trade unions are present and influent also in Poland, even though the workers' level of readiness to strike dropped, in Hungary (although more active in the health care and educational systems rather than among workers) and in the Czech Republic (21% of the employees are members in trade unions).

for scarring off the investors (in Romania), for slowing down reforms and for harboring some of the last remaining “commie nests”. Their alleged link to the socialist past and their image as “workers’ movements” is shaping their future in a negative manner. But trade unions don’t necessarily represent workers, some of the biggest Eastern unions being movements of teachers and health care employees*. And, strengthening this sector has its advantages: trade unions are on the one hand, more closer to their voters, as they are smaller and with a mission better understood (by their public) than parties, and, on the other hand, *they’re interested more in efficiently representing their backers** than in gaining political power*. So that the following question becomes inevitable: How many of the Central and Eastern European countries focused on rebuilding this sector and how many of them actually want to? The answer is that even if they wouldn’t be lacking the will to do so, such tasks would nowadays seem impossible to achieve – remaining successful trade unions in the CEE countries are, almost all of them, present in state-owned companies and state-controlled structures such as the health care and the educational systems. Supporting the development of trade unions inside private-owned companies is regarded by all the countries of the region as suicidal: it would mean the destruction of the fragile Eastern European economies, due to a massive retreat of the foreign investors to more cooperative Third World countries.

But it isn’t just the CEE countries’ fear about the trade unions potential of scarring off investors and sabotaging reforms that’s keeping them from supporting such movements: detractors of the idea of Eastern European trade unions point out at the high level of corruption that’s plaguing the trade unionist scene. Trade unions leaders often tend to use their power and influence in order to obtain personal benefits, while they’re especially vulnerable to bribery and extortion – as they are left to establish their own hierarchy inside their organizations. While these facts can not be denied, the trade unionist

scene is often depicted in terms resembling to the situation of Mafia controlled unions during the 30’s in the United States.

Yet corruption represents a problem common to the entire Eastern European society, whith the lack of transparency regarding the fund-raising procedures inside the party system being a far greater problem then the one faced by trade unions. As any other organizations, trade unions are increasingly harder to control: once they become larger, the leading elite of the structure tends to become more independent, meaning that it starts looking out rather after it’s own interests, than after the ones of the entire organization***. Still, problems such as these, are, as proved by Robert Michels, common to all democracies, and they should be addressed by legislative measures tackling corruption and improving the level of transparency regarding procedures inside organizations and especially funding from outside.

Civic participation and political culture

Having tried to determine what are the ways by which civic participation nowadays influences the development of the public institution, two new questions arise:

The first one refers to what influences civic participation, while the second one deals with how the political institution developed (due to civic participation) in the Central and Eastern European countries.

When addressing the first question, a key role should be given to the existing mind-set in each country and, of course, to the *civic education and culture*****. The society in some countries might be shaped as to forbid the civic participation of larger groups*****, while tradition and mentality might also be contrary to the citizens’ rate of involvement*****. Still, the present situation in most of the CEE countries proves that civic participation did it’s job in backing the democratic political system, starting with the events which took place in 1989 and finishing with the more recent situation in Yugoslavia.



*: Compared to other countries, especially strong in Hungary and Romania.

**: Sometimes, leaders of trade unions even choose the way of personal sacrifice: in Romania, the leader of the Tepro Iasi Union (representing thousands of workers from Iasi) was murdered after he refused to cope with the corrupt governmental representatives and foreign Czech investors controlling the Tepro Industrial platform.

***: It a process similar to the one described by Mr. Robert Michels in his book “Political Parties” (Les Partis politiques. Bibliothèque de philosophie scientifique, Paris, Flammarion, 1914), an essay on the oligarchic tendencies of democratic organizations such as parties.

****: Focus and Eurobarometer surveys claim having identified a low amount of civic culture among Slovaks, which should explain the polarization of political forces during the mid ’90s. But such “facts” are questionable: why should Slovaks have less civic culture than Poles or any other neighboring nation?

*****: For instance, studies showed that the tribal structure of Albanian society played it’s part in the country’s development, including in the citizens support rate for any other initiatives other than the ones using traditional channels.

*****: In Poland, surprisingly, NGOs are seen as “social-funds-consumers” or as groups lobbying only for stronger financial support, in spite of the large size of the NGO sector. Surveys such as Focus or Eurobarometer explain the existing negative attitude towards NGOs in relationship to the country’s socialist past.

As to the second question, once the former socialist regimes were abolished in the CEE countries, the political institution evolved in a less obvious manner. The participation of the citizens although not anymore as direct as in 1989, played its part more or less in supporting control activities of the political institution initiated by the press or the NGO sector. But, most probably, the fact that governments didn't need any more uprisings to refresh their memory on how the socialist regimes ended*, had the most significant role.

Integrating the civic participation

The reader probably already understood from the article's general tone that it supports the idea that civic participation alone wouldn't have had succeeded in protecting and developing the achievements of the last decade, without the support of strong external factors. The political elite that carried out the reforms in most of the CEE countries, although both backed, selected and controlled through civic participation, would have accomplished far less without Western help. And even the existing rate of civic participation is an effect of the Western efforts to prevent the CEE states from blocking civic initiatives. Now, it is obvious that after the fall of communism, there were no structures in any of the ex-socialist countries strong enough to stop the government from returning to non-democratic procedures of exerting power. Of course, immediately after the fall of communism, most of the newly established democracies were run by revolutionaries, mainly dissidents strongly attached to the values of democracy. But only few of these leaders knew how to deal with the crucial economic and financial issues their countries faced, and they were soon replaced by more experienced people**. Also on the lower levels of the state's structures and administration, few of the former communist bureaucrats were changed, simply because there was no one experienced enough to be replaced with.



Many claimed that these structures were the most dangerous for the civic participation, and that it was mainly the Western pressure to protect the democratization process that kept the CEE countries on the track leading to EU integration. And to a certain extent they're right: although the population supported both NATO and EU integration and the democratization process, it lacked *the experience* needed to support democracy. The citizens had the will to participate in uprisings (as seen in 1989) and to support political changes (as shown in recent polls such as Eurobarometer and Focus), but not the knowledge of the new political and economic institutions – which is understandable due to the speed of the changes.

Summing things up, the idea is that on the one hand, civic participation can not exist without the state's permission. On the other hand, there's no civic participation if there isn't any civic culture, and it is the role of the democratic state to support the development of civic culture, which in the end will ensure that it's political institutions work correctly. The West did a lot in taking the pressure of having to develop civic culture off the shoulders of CEE governments, yet its help focused only on the situation in some of the former socialist countries: just as on the economic level, in this case also different levels of civic participation might draw new lines of reclusion in the East***.

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*: Except for Romania, where one government was overthrown by a miner uprising in 1991, with the last out of the 6 miner revolts taking place as late as 1999.

** : These people were regarded as “former communists”: it seemed to be the fate of any left-wing party to be regarded, especially by the media, as “former communist”. Yet, since all parties, including right-wing ones, had among their ranks former members of the Communist Party from their countries, the choice of words seems unfortunate. Anyway, the point is that the political class wasn't prepared to face civic participation (especially in the form of media) in a democratic way (due to the fact that it had been brought up during socialism), and it took years until it learned to do so.

***: How can we compare the Czech Republic or “sunny” Slovenia with the grim realities of the year's 2000 Ukraine? A journalist was beheaded after accusing the president of corruption, but after strong protests supported by a large part of Kiev's population, president Leonid Kuchma is still on duty.