

## **Redefining Civil Society in Central and Eastern European. A Romanian proposal. How local challenges rise old questions. \***

by Mihai SEBE\*\*

*\* The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any organization he is connected to.*

### *Abstract*

*During the last couple of years the political and economic turmoil in Romania brought to public attention the role and status of the civil society. This attention proved, for me, that the role of civil society is yet to be fully achieved, unless all the sides involved accept civil society as an active participant in politics. Thus this essay tries to bring to the debate a new potential role of these organizations, which may serve as a starting point for a series of academic analyses.*

During the last couple of years the political and economic turmoil in Romania brought to public attention the role and status of the civil society. This attention proved, for me, *that the role of civil society is yet to be fully achieved, unless all the sides involved accept civil society as an active participant in politics.* When we speak about politics we speak about civility and mutual understanding as “politics is about reaching a compromise, and finding ways for those to disagree to rub along with one other” (Gerry STOCKER, [\*Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work\*](#), Palgrave, 2006, p. 4).

Although there is a scholarly opinion regarding the differences between “a ‘big P’ politics of government conducted at a national (or perhaps an international) level and a ‘small P’ politics of civil society that takes place in communities and associations of citizens” (Ulrich BECK, [\*The Reinvention of Politics\*](#), Cambridge: Polity, 1996 *apud* Gerry STOCKER, [\*Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work\*](#), Palgrave, 2006, p. 4) the truth is “that there is no escape from politics” and the best solution would be “to extend the scope of politics of civil society alongside allowing citizens greater access to the more mainstream ‘big P’ politics” (Gerry STOCKER, [\*Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work\*](#), Palgrave, 2006, p. 4).

While analysing the role of civil society, one must start, as in my case, from the issues level. Only by applying those reverse engineering methods and clearly identifying the problems, can we have a future for the civil society, because, unless we directly tackle the source of the problems, all solutions will be only palliative and inactive on a medium and long term, and we shall glorify only an empty shell voided of any true importance.

That being said and taking into consideration the history lessons, as regards the transition to democracy and the way in which the dictators triumphed, it becomes evident that the civil society is a key actor playing the role of a “watch-dog of democracy,” the one and only that, at its basic level, must hold the state responsible whilst providing a fertile ground for nurturing and taking care of the seed of good governance, of democratic ideas and practices.

This distinction became more evident during the 2012 Romanian protests when the attempts of the main political parties to enlist the civil society organisations within their ranks became criticised, as the public sphere saw the birth of the distinction between “watch dog of democracy” vs “[\*lap dog\*](#)” [\*civil society\*](#), a partisan civil society (Mircea GEOANA, [\*Nevoia unei societăți civile independente și eficiente. Cum depășim capcana „câinelui de casă”\*](#), 28 January 2012). The civil society must not be an annex to any political party, but an independent force, critical of the government, in order to be able to contain its excesses. We have here all the details of a “*ménage-à-trois*” between the parties in power – opposition parties – civil society. In this triangle of power, none of the two traditional political actors should be allowed to annex the civil society. We assist therefore to the birth of a new way of

making politics where a non-elected actor, the civil society, is allowed to interfere on the political scene. The traditional vision of an elective regime is thus challenged – how can a free association of individuals act as it is both a democratic instrument (free association) and a non-elected actor (and thus supposedly a non-democratic one)?

The civil society must thus become a “professionalized” body of “volunteers” able to engage with all the political parties on project of common interest, funded on similar principles, which are transparent and seek the greater good while keeping a critical eye on all other projects with antagonistic principles. Thus it must be able to simultaneously engage with and criticize all the political parties, while avoiding the characterization of being hypocrite. There is no such thing as hypocrisy - if you follow the common good and you must be able to work with all actors while not selling what you believe to be true for a fistful of silver (a watch dog and not a lap dog).

In this sense we are much closer to the ancient ideal of citizenship, of *paideia* seen “as a formative and life-long process through which the individual became an asset to the *polis*, to his friends and family, capable of and willing to live up to the highest ideals of the community” (Peter CRITCHLEY, [The Ideal of Citizenship](#)). The civil society must then prepare involved citizens, fully aware of their rights and obligations, a prerequisite for true humanity in an Aristotelian sense of view. “But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state.” (ARISTOTLE, [Politics, Book 1](#))

This civil society, through its scope and constituents must also be a social partner. It must complement the state, must bring reason and equity in the public sphere as its spirit, characterized by equality, voluntarism and a sense of community is essential for problem solving. In a impoverish society, a priority must be “the development of national social network, where the state encourages and co-opts the private sector, the civic one [...] and the religious one, for solving an ocean of social issues” (Mircea GEOANA, [Nevoia unei societăți civile independente și eficiente. Cum depășim capcana „câinelui de casă”](#), 2012).

But solving social issues tends to be more complicated as the financing sources tend to be a problem. A 2013 research identified as perceived problems: lack of funding (74 % of the NGO’s); lack of interest from the state institutions (39% of the NGO’s) and the late arrival of the European funding (36% of the NGO’s). As solutions they tend to favour the social entrepreneurship as mean of providing additional funds as well as an expected increase in funding on behalf of the private companies ([“STUDIUL: Lipsa fondurilor și dezinteresul instituțiilor de stat, principalele probleme ale societății civile”](#), *Mediafax*, 17 June 2013)

The funding system is seen by many in the civil society as “dysfunctional and in most cases directed against civil society” (Valeriu NICOLAE, [Cum sa distrugi societatea civila – un proiect european](#), 4 October 2013). For some authors the way in which European funds were designed hasn’t taken into consideration the local peculiarities – the NGO’s are seen only as working instruments designed to do what the state institutions cannot do or find too difficult to do while the cultural paradigm is not adequate to the local mentalities and corruption risks. Briefly – there are too few safeguards against corruption and fraud and the civil society is seen as self-sufficient and well financed by the Romanian citizens. We have a system engineered for advanced societies, where the ecological and trans-gender issues, among others, are important and do not take into account the local realities – they tend to finance “artificial forms” (such as trainings and conferences) instead of solving grassroots issues.

The European funding finally exposed the weaknesses of the institutional capacity of many NGO’s – we have the same staff that once dealt with minor funding to deal now with millions of Euro’s projects. The conditions required and the delays in funding as well as the need to write projects not adapted to the local realities but the expectations of financing bodies lead to compromises and left the civil society legally exposed to external controls, which seriously impair its independence and ability to act as an active third party. The activists became managers but often without any training and with the social and economic abilities

required by such a position (Valeriu NICOLAE, [Cum sa distrugi societatea civila – un proiect european](#), 4 October 2013).

These are just some of the issues that affect the civil society, issues that in the end are common to the Romanian society as a whole, but whose solving requires an active involvement in the social arena and finally overcoming the artificial distinction between the “big P” and “small P” politics.

In the end we assist to the lack of alternatives in place of the highly criticized social and political institutions in place, as those who often make those evidences based critiques failed to provide anything in place of the criticized institutions. If everything is wrong, if democracy, trade unions, political institutions are limited and in crisis on what do we depend?

The above mentioned problems suggest that we should take a closer look at the process of forging a new model of politics for our times and citizens. A devolved civil society, active and dynamic can thus sustain the common speech about the inherent democratic character of the modernity, moreover if we observe that many issues currently debated – environment protests, new technologies, gender issues and so on – where, not so long ago, belonging to what the scholar Ulrich Beck calls “subpolitics” (Ulrich BECK, [“Subpolitics. Ecology and Disintegration of Institutional Power”](#), *Organization & Environment*, vol. 10, March 1997, pp. 52 – 65). Thus we need a reinvention of politics, and implicitly of the views of the civil society, that takes into consideration the civil society as a political actor that addresses the demands of a society in evolution, an evolution from the earlier form of industrial society toward something new, yet not radically different.

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