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## **The Role of Civil Society in Transformation and Democratization in Post-Communist Europe – “Aspects of the Democratic Transition in selected Central and East European States in Comparative Perspective”**

### **Introduction**

Without any doubt there are strong ties between civil society and democracy. But could this also be proofed for the relationship of civil society and the process of democratization? At first sight it seems to be self-evident, that promoting democracy is the more effective the stronger civil society is. This means that democracy promotion respectively the development towards democracy has to focus on the civil society-development in order to make democratization more successful.

But there are some problems. Only two of them shall be discussed here:

The first problem is that the terms used are highly normative and lack a homogeneous definition. Defining “democracy” and “civil society” is the key to the analysis.

Secondly there has to be found proof for the apparent relation between civil society and the process of democratization. But this is not as simple as it may seem. Especially the diversity of regime changes in Central and East Europe shows that validation of the aforementioned relation is not easily done.

Therefore we will continue in three steps:

First we will give a working definition of the terms “democracy” and “civil society”. The second step is to gain an overview on the role of civil society in the regime changes in Central and Eastern Europe. This requires identifying parallels and differences in the role civil society has played in the three phases of transformation: the liberalization of autocracy, the transition to and the consolidation of democracy (Merkel 2003; Schneider/Schmitter 2004). At last a conclusion shall give an outlook to the possible future of democracy in this area.

### **Definitions**

This is not the place to discuss what the theory of democracy is (Schmidt 2000) or what a “good” democracy is. The main emphasis lies on the dimensions of the rule of law, accountability, responsiveness, freedom and equality (Morlino 2004: 10). In our context we have to take a look on what democracy means in the models of transformation:

*“A democratic transition is complete when sufficient agreements have been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government de facto has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with bodies de jure.”*  
(Linz/Stepan 1996: 3)

This means the existence of an electoral regime, political rights, civil rights, horizontal accountability and effective power to govern (Merkel 2004: 26). In this description civil society does not play any role – but this is not true. A democratic consolidation is complete if and only if “*democracy has become ‘the only game in town’*” (Linz/Stepan 1996: 5). This consolidated liberal democracy – also known as “embedded” democracy – exists when it contains the following five arenas:

*“First the conditions must exist for the development of a free and lively civil society. Second, there must be a relatively autonomous and valued political society. Third, there must be a rule of law to ensure legal guarantees for citizens’ freedoms and independent associational life. Fourth, there must be a state bureaucracy that is useable by the new democratic government. Fifth, there must be an institutionalized economic society.”* (ib.: 7)

Thus neither elections as the central indicator of democracy on one side nor an established civic culture in the meaning of existence of consolidated democratic attitudes as the finalization of transformation on the other side can provide a useful definition of democracy consolidation (Linz/Stepan 1996: 5). Defining democracy by more or less free elections involves the problem, that shady states would be called democracies – “electoral democracies” as Freedom House ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)) denominates them in differentiation to “liberal democracies”. This would lead into the “electoralist fallacy” (ib.: 4; Kubicek 2001). In consequence the selectivity of this term is not high enough, because it covers both, semi free and free democracies.

Using normative definitions may lead however as well to problematic results. Especially the foundation of a civic culture needs decades respectively a change of generations to show any effect, as can be observed for Germany, Italy or Japan after World War II. If a state is only a democracy if it complies with a rigid checklist of democratic indicators then the count of “real” democracies is small.

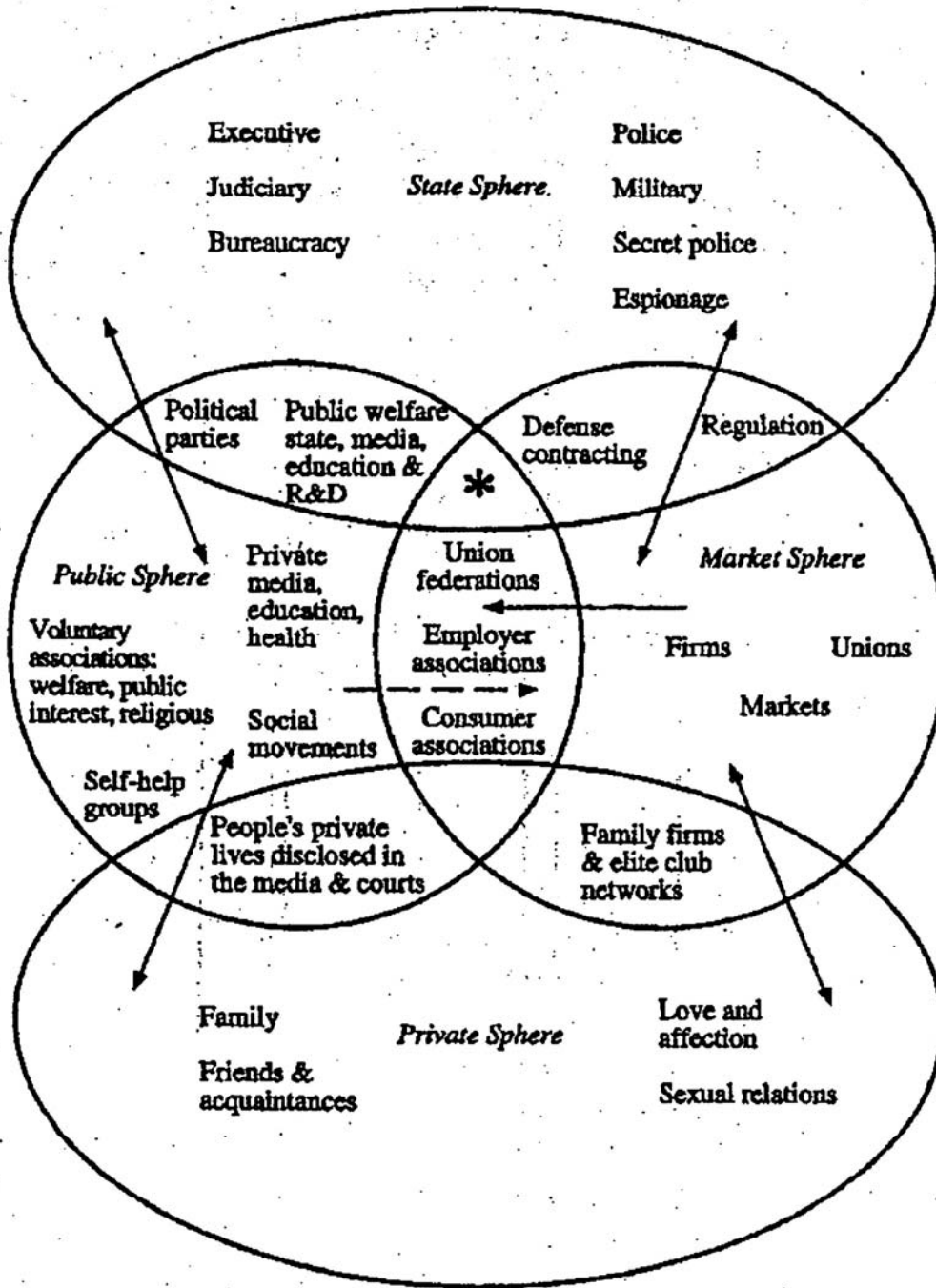
Therefore a more distinguishing spectrum is needed. On one side there are autocracies, on the other consolidated liberal or “embedded” democracies. Between them there are so called “defective” democracies: “exclusive”, “illiberal”, “delegative” and finally “tutelary” democracies. But this does not mean that “defected” democracies are instable or only a transition-stadium to “real” democracies. If in the eyes of elites and population of a country they are more effective than a liberal democracy they can have a long life (Merkel 2004).

To take a look at civil society it is useful to begin with its role in an “embedded” democracy. This type of democracy has, as we have seen, different arenas – and one of them is the civil society. Furthermore an established civil society based on a civic culture is in the theory of regime changes the last step of the consolidation of democracy. However a civil society is not necessarily only the outcome of the transformation to democracy, but it is in different ways a stimulus of the transformation itself (Croissant/Lauth/Merkel 2000: 33; Merkel 2003: 224ff.). This is one of the reasons, why the democratization-process in Central and Eastern Europe differs from country to country. Simply to focus on the end of the transformation ignores the diversity of regime changes in this area.

But what in detail is civil society? It is the “arena of polity where self-organization groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests” (Linz/Stepan 1996: 7). Others refer to the intermediary character of the civil society:

*“Civil society represents a sphere of dynamic and responsive public discourse between the state, the public sphere consisting of voluntary organizations, and the market sphere concerning private firms and unions”* (Janoski 1998: 12).

*Introduction to Citizenship*



\* Public law corporations with tripartite control.

Figure 1.1. A conceptual diagram of the public and private spheres that locate civil society

(Janoski 1998: 13)

These pragmatic working-definitions set the focus on the interaction of voluntary groups in the non-state sphere – that especially means they focus on civic actions (Croissant/Lauth/Merkel 2000: 19).

A normative theory of civil society has to include the following functions: protection of the people against abuse of power by the state, mediation between state and private sphere, socialization, integration and communication (ib.: 11-14). But overloading civil society with normative expectations, especially the automatism of support for democracy or the permanent civil behavior of actors in it, would lead to a restricted sight. There is also a “dark side” of civil society (ib.: 19), which has to be explored, because otherwise failures of transformation processes can’t be explained (Kopecký/Mudde 2003).

## **The Transformation Process in Central and Eastern Europe**

The theory of regime changes enumerates six typical ways to democracy in the three waves (Huntington) of democratization: long time evolution, top down process, bottom up enforcement, negotiated regime change, collapse of the autocracy, disaggregation and new-foundation of states. In reality these ideal-typical ways are mixed.

Also the regime changes in Central and Eastern Europe do not follow a single path. This mixture leads to at least two four-field-matrices according to Karl/Schmitter (1991) and Beyme (1994): One dimension is the role and the mode of cooperation or antagonism between the elites of the autocracy and the opposition: pact vs. imposition; the other dimension is the mode of the transition process: reform vs. revolution, ideological management vs. muddling through.

Others denominate especially for Central and Eastern Europe four typical cases (Glaeßner 1994; Merkel 1999: 401-441):

- a) the controlled top down process (Albania, Bulgaria, Romania),
- b) the negotiated regime change (Poland),
- c) the collapse of the regime (Czechoslovakia), with the special case GDR (both, collapse and end of state) and
- d) new-foundation of states (Baltic States).

## **The role of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe**

In all of these theories the role of civil society is mentioned but not as a central aspect. We will now focus on it. So we have to assort the regime changes in Central and Eastern Europe according to the relevance of civil society in each case. There are three typical cases in the years before 1989:

- a) strong civil society structures (Poland),
- b) weak civil society structures (Czechoslovakia, GDR, Hungary), and
- c) civil society structures totally dependent on the state (Russia).

This list has to be understood as a heuristic instrument.

In the following we look at examples for these three types – including subtypes in the later discussion – to find out how differently developed structures of civil society before, during and after transition effect such transitions – from today’s point of view. This will be demon-

strated considering the cases of Poland, Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic and Russia. It has to be considered that in none of these cases the transformation has yet come to an end.

Our hypothesis is that the historical and cultural context of the countries results in equal or different rudiments of civil society. “Habsburg”- and “Masaryk”-effects in Czechoslovakia, traditions of protest movements supported by the roman-catholic church in Poland, autocratic traditions in Russia, and finally length and style of the communist domination causes typical formations of civil society:

**a) Poland** (Mansfeldová/Szabó 2000; Merkel 1999: 410-414; Goll/Leuerer 2005; Ziemer/Matthes 2002; Fehr 2004):

Before 1989 a civil society in the form of social movements existed – based on the roman-catholic church, a “culture of protest” against the communist party (1968, 1970, 1976, 1980) represented by “KOR” (Komited Obrony Robotników = Workers’ Defense Committee; 1976) and since the 1980s by “Solidarność”, which was forbidden by the communist regime from 1981-1989. In the transformation process the civil society enforced the transformation. In the negotiated regime change at the “round table” in 1989 “Solidarność” was the driving force. At the end president Jaruzelski resigned and opened the way to direct presidential elections in 1990.

“Solidarność” was not a monolithic block. Its character as a mixed compositum leads to differentiation processes and a broad spectrum of political and social associations. The only common aim of the anti-communist opposition in the middle-80s was to legalize “Solidarność” again, thus the clashes between the unequal former partners in the movement could not be bridged anymore in the transition process. Early in the transition process the liberty of associations was guaranteed by a new law in 1989 resulting in many civil society groups being founded. The diffusion in the political and civil sphere is one of the reasons for the hauling process of constitution making. Because the regime change was negotiated the communist party was able to survive, redesign itself and use the dissatisfaction with the economic development to return to government as a post-communist party. Since not only democratic and liberal movements came to existence, there is also a “dark side” of civil society. After all, nationalism is the new (better: “renewed”) ideology to win elections. On the other side a broad non-profit sector with all about 50.000 organizations exists.

Poland today is a liberal democracy with a civil society characterized by cleavages associated with ideologies, which could make political decisions irrational and hysterical. The party system reflects the cleavages in the society. Traditions of protest against government and populism cause problems for democracy. But civil society as a whole seems to be on a good way to give more stability.

**b) Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic** (Mansfeldová/Szabó 2000; Merkel 1999: 414-418; Vodička 2002; Fehr 2004):

Rudimentary approaches to a civil society in Czechoslovakia prior to 1968 were cut off with the invasion of the Warsaw-Pact. After it a “frozen posttotalitarian regime” (Linz/Stepan 1996: 317) existed without any space for a civil society. The few dissidents from the “Charta 77”, which was a moral institution without any political influence, lived under pressure. During the crisis of communism the political system collapsed due to exogenous factors like the “Perestrojka” in the USSR. In the transformation process the weak structures of a civil society like the “Charta 77” or the “HOS” (Hnutí za občanskou svobodu = Movement for Civil Freedom) had to manage the regime change at the “round table”. In this phase from 1990 to 1992

many organizations were being founded, thereafter saturation occurred. The main reason for this stagnation was the problem of civil society groups to find members because the permanent mobilization in the communist era and other problems (especially economic ones) caused apathy. In contrast to Poland a lot of time was spent to provide for new legislation concerning the law of associations. Two differing theories of civil society stood in conflict: the moral approach of Václav Havel and the pragmatic approach of Václav Klaus. This led to polarization between government and civil society into which many former idealistic dissidents retired. Strong initiatives for liberty of mass media and independence of public broadcast and against corruption indicated the presence of the civil society ("Impulses 99"). Nowadays approximately 40.000 non-profit organizations exist in the Czech Republic.

At the present the Czech Republic has a clearly structured party system along cleavages (especially the economic policy) and a civil society bridging the cleavages in society. Observers figure that after the economic consolidation and the formation of a middle class the civil society will be entirely evolved in the Tocqueville mind.

**c) Russia** (Mommsen 2002; Beichelt/Kraatz 2000; Beichelt 2004):

The origin of a civil society in Russia coincided with Gorbačev's "Perestrojka"-policy. But even before that some observers noticed a "latent" civil society. However it can surely be stated that in the late 1980s a dynamic growth of civil society groups took place. The climax of this "movement society" respectively "insurgent civil society" was transgressed in the early 1990s. But these structures never led to a western-style institutional civil society of interest articulation. The reasons for that are the defects of the electoral regime, the public arena, the regime of civic freedoms and the vertical power structure. Other important aspects are the communist legacy, the lacking of democratic traditions, the frustration deriving from the break-down of the USSR, the economic decline, and as a result of all the nostalgia of former better times in the Soviet Union (Merkel 1999: 531). Patrimonial relationships, oligarchic tendencies and authoritarian structures are more dominant than the rudimental civil society structures.

Russia's way seems to be leading more to autocracy than to democracy. The civil society is weak and will remain so in the near future. Only in the large cities a rudiment civil society exists surviving in an "uncivil" environment. Improvement can only be brought from outside the civil society. On the other hand the weakness of the civil society leads to no effects on the "dark side".

## **Conclusion**

The three cases show typical aspects of the role civil society plays in regime changes. The results shall be expressed as follows (Mansfeldová/Szabó 2000: 94-95; Beyme 1994a: 100-123; Fehr 2004):

1. To explain the role of civil society the historical, structural, institutional, political and cultural context has to be noted. Political culture and traditions on one side, style and length of the communist domination on the other are main factors for the formation of civil society (positive: Czech Republic, Poland; negative: Russia). The chance for democratic stabilization therefore is better in Central than Eastern Europe.
2. Civil society prior to 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe meant an idealistic concept (strong emphasis on human rights, while neglecting the economy and political conditions; concepts of a third way between capitalism and "Stalinism"). This causes a dichotomy between the civil society and the new political actors after the regime changes in the sense of

“idealistic polity” vs. “realistic polity” (both, Czech Republic, Poland). If the new democratic elites appear to be corrupt and ineffective, problems for democracy are inevitable (both, Czech Republic, Poland).

3. Peaceful protest – both political and social – is a central aspect for the stabilization of democracy because it is an element of the democratic process.
4. A broadly based spectrum of activities and organizations to articulate demands to the new elites indicates democratic consolidation.
5. In the new democracies not only democratic organizations rise. Antidemocratic, illiberal and nationalistic movements build the “dark side” of civil society (Poland).
6. Civil society structures orientated on consensus and civil regulation of conflicts lead to democratic stabilization (Czech Republic). Aggressive and uncivil attitudes resulting in violent confrontations are not leading to the consolidation of a civil society.

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