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## Croatia : in Search of Civil Society

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**Gojko Bežovan**

## **CROATIA. IN SEARCH OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

### **Introduction**

The Civil Society Index (CSI) project, as action oriented research carried out within a larger, comparative framework of the international CIVICUS network, has been implemented to assess the state of civil society in Croatia. From September 2003 to May 2005 data was collected through a regional stakeholder survey, regional stakeholder consultations, a population survey, interviews with key informants, a media review and secondary data<sup>1</sup>. The following paper is dedicated to an overview of the main findings of the research<sup>2</sup>. The findings are put against some notes concerning a historical overview of the preceding path of civil society development in Croatia.

### **Historical Overview**

Croatia, as a former part of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, has a tradition of formal and informal civic involvement. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the development of Croatian civil society was strongly influenced by industrialization and the Catholic Church. Prominent industrialists established various types of foundations and the Church responded to social needs, continuing its activities under the socialist rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ledić 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the CSI research methods, see <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp?skip2=yes> and Anheier 2004.

<sup>2</sup> To view the full report “Civil Society in Croatia: Gaining Trust and Establishing Partnerships with the State and Other Stakeholders”, see <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp?skip2=yes>.

Following the Second World War, civil society was, however, heavily dominated by the state and Communist Party. Its activities fell under a system of state control. In Croatia, as in other Central and Eastern European countries, this legacy of the Communist era has had a profound influence on the subsequent development of civil society. It has conditioned citizens' attitudes toward civic engagement, which is primarily visible in the perception of social and economic problems as a state responsibility. These attitudes are one of the major causes for limited citizen participation in civil society organizations (CSOs)<sup>3</sup>.

As early as the 1980s, several Croatian CSOs focusing on environmental, political and cultural activities emerged. Their rise corresponded with the creation of political parties. Eventually, both contributed to the breakdown of the Communist political system and gaining by Croatia independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. After the fall of Communism, the development of civil society was nonetheless impeded by unfavourable political factors such as an authoritarian rule, the civil war and a subsequent national refugee and displaced persons crisis and economic crisis. In the late 1990s, following the war in the region, CSOs helped again to oust the authoritarian regime and transform Croatia into a parliamentary democracy. With new, democratically elected coalition governments, state-civil society relations began to improve slowly through institutionalisation of dialogue and cooperation.

A pilot phase of the CSI was conducted in 2001. The findings indicated then that cooperation between CSOs and the state as well as between CSOs and the private sector is still poor. Citizens' engagement demonstrated low levels, the existing CSOs were concentrated in urban areas and, in general, lacked transparency. Civil society was then also viewed as lacking roots in local communities. Its activists had a reputation of 'speaking a foreign language' (Bežovan 2004). The CSI research project conducted in 2003–2005 provides new insights and allows for making a comparison with the earlier stages of the development of civil society in Croatia.

### **The structure, characteristics and distribution of CSOs in Croatia (2003–2005)**

The CSI research brought forth data confirming the still low level of organization of the civic sector, weak networking within it and limi-

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<sup>3</sup> The abbreviation „CSOs” is used as an equivalent to „NGOs”.

ted citizen participation in it. During regional stakeholder consultations, participants consistently pointed to a lack of networking as a pressing problem. With respect to self-regulation of the civil society sector, fewer than 20% of stakeholders confirmed existence of any effective or enforceable self-regulatory mechanisms, such as a code of conduct. A majority of stakeholders complained also about an inadequate support infrastructure and a shortage of civil society umbrella organizations. The establishment of the National Foundation for Civil Society Development in 2004 is an important step in the development of such support infrastructure for Croatian civil society.

Low levels of citizen participation and in particular the lack of widespread active CSO membership are seen as a challenge limiting the growth of Croatian civil society. The *Civil Society 2004 Survey*<sup>4</sup> reported that only 35% of Croatian citizens belong to a CSO whereas only 12% of citizens belong to more than one CSO<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, charitable donations are part of Croatia's civic culture: 66.8% of citizens reportedly donated cash or goods for humanitarian purposes in 2004. Nevertheless in terms of financial value, the citizens' charity amounted to only 1.2% of the average individual net income (cf. <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp?skip2=yes>).

Another notable weakness of the Croatian civil society's structure is the aforementioned concentration of CSOs in large cities and urban areas. According to governmental statistics, 50.4% of registered associations are located in or in the immediate vicinity of Croatia's four largest cities (cf. *ibid.*: 28). During an interview, one of the respondents noted: "Civil society is concentrated in big towns, while small communities do not benefit. In Zagreb, civil society is well developed; however, these activities have no impact on those of us outside of Zagreb" (cf. *ibid.*).

In terms of intermittent civic engagement there may, however, be noticed an upward trend. For instance, according to the *Civil Society 2004 Survey*, since 1990, 61.3% of Croatian citizens have signed a peti-

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<sup>4</sup> *The Civil Society 2004 Survey* was carried out from July to December 2004. In carrying out the survey, the backgrounds of the 400 respondents reflected the profile of Croatia's population. For more information, see an annex on research methods in the Croatia country report "Civil Society in Croatia: Gaining Trust and Establishing Partnerships with the state and other stakeholders" (<http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp?skip2=yes>).

<sup>5</sup> Of these 35% belonging to a CSO, 16% belonging to sports associations, 12.8% to trade or labour unions, 8.5% to the war veteran association, 7.8% to social welfare organizations and 7.3% to faith-based organizations (*ibid.*).

tion and 14.6% have attended at least one demonstration (*ibid.*). These non-partisan political actions are signs of a civic culture gradually taking root in Croatia. Likewise, the growth of volunteerism and public increased interest in volunteering is a potential factor which may invigorate civil society in the country<sup>6</sup>.

### **The external environment of CSOs in Croatia**

The environment dimension refers to political, social, cultural, economic and legal factors as well as attitudes and behaviour of state and private sector actors toward civil society actors. As mentioned, during the period of transition to democracy in the 1990s, unfavourable, authoritarian political environment impeded the development of civil society in Croatia. Also, using the media, the state frequently accused the (largely foreign donor-driven) civil society sector of being foreign hirelings, spies and Serb protectors.

The 2003–2005 CSI assessment revealed that the present external conditions have improved with a view to the civil society development. Basic legal acts, socio-economic context, human rights and freedoms are largely in place. However, the political context and socio-cultural context, including relations between CSOs and business actors have not improved as expected.

With respect to the political context, the rule of law is undermined by a weak judicial system contributing to a degree of legal insecurity in Croatia. Moreover, from 2003 to 2004, public perception of corruption worsened as the government was implicated in numerous corruption scandals. All this produced high levels of mistrust towards state authorities and institutions. The population survey revealed that only 30% of Croatians believe people can be trusted<sup>7</sup>.

The deep mistrust within society also impedes the work of CSOs since CSOs tend not to be trusted either. The problem is aggravated by the national television's tendency to focus on scandals involving CSOs and to present the civil society sector as an arena suffering from internal conflict, mistrust and rivalry.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Civil Society 2004 Survey* also showed that 38.4% of citizens were engaged in volunteer work in 2004 (cf. <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp?skip2=yes>).

<sup>7</sup> According to the Transparency International 2004 Corruption Perceptions Index, Croatia ranked 67 out of 146 countries, while in 2003, Croatia ranked 59 out of 133 countries (cf. <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp?skip2=yes>).

The environment in which civil society operates is also somewhat constrained by poor relations between civil society and the state as well as those between civil society and the private sector. Although civil society-state relations improved after 2000 with the establishment of ad hoc consultative bodies to address issues such as child rights, minority rights and gender equality, experts interviewed during the CSI project remarked that these bodies frequently create a façade of civil society involvement while failing to give civil society any real power or voice.

Nonetheless, after 2000, two important mechanisms designed to facilitate CSOs and state cooperation were established. These are the Government Office for Cooperation with CSOs and the Council for Development of Civil Society acting as advisory bodies to the national government. Unfortunately, the cooperation between government and civil society has waned since the new government took power in 2004. Therefore, although overall relations have improved since the 1990s and some mechanisms have been put in place for social dialogue and rules of engagement, there is still a need to pressure the state to establish new forums for cooperation and ensure that existing forms of state-civil society cooperation and dialogue continue.

Only recently there has been some interest from the private sector to cooperate with civil society actors. Out of the interviewed stakeholders, 75.4% believe the private sector is indifferent or suspicious of civil society. In turn, the corporate sector tends to consider CSOs solely as beneficiaries of their support, while many CSOs consider the corporate sector solely as donors. In general, corporate philanthropy remains rather underdeveloped, with the average share of CSOs income from corporate sector funds being around 18.2%. However, small and medium businesses are becoming increasingly interested in CSOs and have begun to make charitable donations (*ibid.*).

Legal and socio-economic factors are widely seen as generally supportive of civil society. A majority of stakeholders view CSO registration as quick, simple and low cost, despite bureaucratic difficulties that smaller CSOs face in the process. Tax laws favouring CSOs were enacted in the early 2000s so that CSOs do not pay VAT on goods and services which they buy with money from foreign donations<sup>8</sup>. Compa-

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<sup>8</sup> In April 2004, the *Law on Amendments of the VAT Law* exempted humanitarian assistance, social welfare, health, education, culture, science, religion and sports CSOs from paying VAT on goods and services from money of foreign donations, but those in the field of environmental protection, human rights protection and democratization were excluded from the benefits.

nies and citizens are offered incentives for financial contributions for the sake of CSOs. In general, the legal framework is still in transition, but is encouraging the growth and sustainability of civil society in Croatia.

### **Predominant value orientations identified in the CSO sector in Croatia**

The CSI findings reveal that civil society actors declare by and large a dedication to democracy, tolerance, non-violence, gender equity and environmental sustainability. However, some inconsistency is revealed between the declarative and practical dimension. Moreover, civil society actors appear to be more successful in practicing these values internally than promoting them externally.

Given Croatia's recent history, democracy has been a key issue for civil society. To date, the majority of democracy promotion activities pertain to the aftermath of the civil war and violation of minority rights. Important civil society campaigns in this area include GONG's role in the election process, activities of the Croatian Helsinki Committee and the Legal Services Coalition advocacy for the Freedom of Information Act or the 16-day campaign against violence against women.

Another highlight is the civil society's dedication to environmental protection. Since the 1980s, ecological CSOs have made aware and mobilized the public around environmental issues. Co-operation with business and government in the matter is increasingly more effective. Environmental CSOs are now regarded as important stakeholders able to advocate their interests successfully within frameworks of large investment projects such as the oil *Družba-Adria* pipeline project. Organisation *Eko Kvarner* is seen as a leading actor involved in monitoring of the project for instance.

By contrast, the civil society sector is rather weak at practicing and promoting transparency. Similarly to the 2001 pilot study, financial transparency within CSOs remains problematic. Due to some CSOs' unscrupulous activities and the media's focus on scandals involving CSOs, the perceived level of corruption among CSOs is quite high. Low transparency within the civil society arena perpetuates a negative public image of civil society and makes citizens' involvement less attractive. Moreover, best known CSOs mostly rely on foreign funding and they do not cultivate membership as important part of their civil

society legitimacy. Thus, establishing more effective transparency and accountability practices should be a priority for a long term health and sustainability of civil society in the country (cf. Bežovan, Zrinščak, Vugec 2005).

In addition, civil society's activity in the field of poverty eradication is limited despite the fact that the national poverty risk rate (19%) is high (cf. <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp?skip2=yes>). Nevertheless, church-affiliated organisations have tackled the issue of poverty. A foundation of Bishop J. Lang, supported by respective stakeholders, has been for instance responsible for a humanitarian action "Don't forget me" dedicated to helping old, sick and helpless people. Its actions yield impressive resources and build trust in the Foundation. It might be concluded that the weak involvement of CSOs and citizens in this priority arena is related to mental and organisational legacies of the socialist era when it was the state which was responsible for all social issues.

### **The impact of Croatian civil society on policy-making and interest representation**

The Croatian civil society actors have so far had a moderate impact on public policy. While the sector plays a relatively significant role in empowering and meeting the needs of marginalized groups, it has not had much influence on government policy nor has it been effective in its monitoring and watch-dogging functions to hold the government and private sector accountable. Moreover, in terms of holding the state and private sector accountable, a widespread reluctance must be reported among CSOs to "bite the hand that feeds them".

Furthermore, in general, the civil society sector has inadequate advocacy and lobbying skills to significantly impact on policy-making. Representatives of the state and media perceive CSOs as lacking professionalism, capacity and efficiency. Due to this image of professional incompetence, organisational management, fundraising and public relations, valuable CSO ideas often do not make it on the public agenda and if they do they are quickly discredited. In addition, persistent public mistrust towards CSOs impedes their potential for public influence and ability to build social capital in Croatia.

On a positive note, it appears, however, that slowly a new space is opening up for CSOs to influence social and human rights policy in the country. Civil society activity is increasing in areas such as fighting



unemployment and domestic violence, which have historically been a domain of the state. For example, in 2004, a coalition of CSOs organized a campaign against family violence. Particularly at the local level, CSOs have been accepted as social partners, assisting victims of family violence by providing services absent from state programmes. CSO activities have also contributed to the government's recent adoption of the National Strategy of Family Violence Protection.

Although the state still remains the dominant policy-maker and service provider, CSOs have been increasingly more successful at providing social welfare services, particularly, as regards needs of marginalized communities (cf. Bežovan, Zrinščak 2001). In many cases CSOs have proven themselves more attentive than the state to meeting the needs of marginalized groups, such as the elderly, poor and disabled. This strategically predisposes CSOs to play a stronger role in the process of developing social policy programmes. However, the majority of CSOs play a reactive role, responding to social needs rather than preventing social problems. This is in part due to their lack of grounding in Croatian society. Building trust between society and civil society actors is necessary to increase citizen involvement and at the same time to anchor civil society in local communities as well as to encourage CSOs to take a proactive policy and service approach grounded in the needs of society.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, based on the findings from the two studies (2001 and 2003–2005), the sustainability and strength of Croatian civil society is shown to be poor but improving. The level of citizen participation in Croatia is already higher than in some other post-Communist countries (cf. Arts, Hagnaars, Halman 2003). At the community level, civic engagement is on the rise and CSOs are increasingly able to attract support of citizens. In addition, local entrepreneurs and local government are increasingly interested in cooperating with civil society initiatives.

Civil society is in the process of building trust and partnership relations with other stakeholders and the state through new networks and channels of dialogue and consultation established at the local and national level. Nonetheless, both past legacies and current identity problems continue to hinder CSOs on their way to become part of mainstream activities in the contemporary Croatian society.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### Chorwacja. W poszukiwaniu społeczeństwa obywatelskiego

Artykuł analizuje kondycję i dynamikę rozwojową społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Chorwacji na tle innych krajów Europy i świata. W świetle prezentowanych danych obecną kondycję społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Chorwacji trzeba określić jako niezadowolającą ze względu na niski odsetek obywateli, którzy są członkami organizacji lub biorą udział w działaniach obywatelskich, a także ze względu na nikły wpływ organizacji obywatelskich na działania w sferze publicznej państwa. Relacje między sferą społeczeństwa obywatelskiego a sferą władz publicznych oraz sferą biznesu należy określić jako w znacznej mierze antagonistyczne i/lub klientelistyczne. Wprowadzane pod presją standardów europejskich i światowych rozwiązania instytucjonalne mają w dużym stopniu fasadowy charakter, choć prawne i podatkowe reguły funkcjonowania organizacji społecznych można określić jako korzystne dla inicjatyw obywatelskich.

Wiele organizacji społeczeństwa obywatelskiego cechuje jednak brak przejrzystości i koniunkturalność; przypisuje się im także bezkrytyczne podporządkowanie się wymogom zachodnich sponsorów. Nagłaśniane przez media skandale korupcyjne, w które zamieszani bywają działacze, dodatkowo wpływają na niski poziom zaufania społecznego do organizacji pozarządowych w Chorwacji. Organizacje te nie są też poważnie zainteresowane poszerzaniem bazy członkowskiej.

Obecne wzory postaw, samoorganizacji i działań w sferze społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Chorwacji są w znacznej mierze wynikiem negatywnych historycznych doświadczeń ostatnich stuleci. W okresie gdy Chorwacja stanowiła część monarchii

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austro-węgierskiej, aktywność obywateli była ograniczana do sfery dobroczynności, sportu i kultury. Po drugiej wojnie światowej komunistyczne państwo zawłaszczyło sferę publiczną w całości i poddało kontroli wszelkie formy aktywności obywateli. Zmiana systemowa po rozpadzie Federacyjnej Republiki Jugosławii doprowadziła do dalszej marginalizacji społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. Wprowadzone wówczas rządy autorytarne w znacznej mierze ograniczały wolności obywatelskie. Wojna, w którą zostało uwikłane społeczeństwo chorwackie na początku lat dziewięćdziesiątych, wprowadziła zamęt w wymiarze postaw i wartości.

Badania wskazują, że choć w ostatnich latach poprawiają się zarówno instytucjonalne warunki funkcjonowania sektora pozarządowego w Chorwacji, jak i wzrasta jego potencjał organizacyjny, kraj ten nadal zajmuje odległe miejsce w międzynarodowych rankingach oceniających poziom rozwoju społeczeństwa obywatelskiego.