A Source of Democratic Legitimacy? Civil Society in East-Central Europe

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More than a decade after the (re-)emergence of democracy, East-Central European politics appears to unanimously confirm Ralf Dahrendorf's dictum of 1990, in which he warned that "the formal process of constitutional reform takes at least six months; [that] a general sense that things are moving up as a result of economic reform is unlikely to spread before six years have passed; [and that] the third condition of the road to freedom is to provide the social foundations which transform the constitution and the economy from fair-weather into all-weather institutions […], and sixty years are barely enough to lay these foundations."[1] And while developments in the region may have diverged from, and usually exceeded, the time frames foreseen, neither the largely sequential character of legal-institutional, economic and political-cultural changes, nor the predicted order of their occurrence can be put into serious doubt by the recent experiences in East-Central Europe.

In this region, the years since 1989 have seen much effort aimed at reforming and refining the formal institutional side of democracy, at establishing institutional structures, amending legislation, reforming bureaucracies, privatising and developing economies towards market formats. Compared with the considerable, albeit differential, progress made in these respects across the countries of the region, the informal side of democracy, the emergence of a commensurate political culture as well as the generation of legitimacy have received much less attention and appear to remain vulnerable, as empirical findings on political efficacy and participation, trust in institutions and assessments of democracy readily reveal.[2] Indicative is also that this imbalance

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[1] Dahrendorf 1990: 92f.

[2] Comprehensive overviews on public opinion vis-à-vis democracy in East-Central Europe can be found with the International Social Survey Programme, the New Democracies Barometer, and Plasser, Ulram & Waldrauch 1998. Country-specific overviews are provided by Bútorová 1998, Potucek 1999, Zagórski & Strzeszewski 2000, Grabowska & Szawiel 2001.

between the formal and informal dimensions of democratic consolidation has been largely paralleled in the scholarly literature on the theme, with an increased interest in questions of political culture, legitimacy and, as the theme of this paper, civic initiative and structures of civil society being observable only more recently.[3]

Against the background of the weakness of the cultural underpinnings of new democracies, a search has begun for possible sources of democratic legitimacy that has, once again, brought civil society into the centre of attention. After all, as has often been claimed, it was civil society in the region that had an important, if not the most significant, share in ending state-socialism.[4] Consequently, many observers have identified considerable potential in the realm of civic initiatives and organisations of civil society, from which effects for democratising political culture and generating legitimacy could develop.

This potential of civil society is the main theme of the present paper. In the first part, some theoretical issues concerning the link between legitimacy and civil society will be considered. A number of aspects arising around the notion of legitimacy will be reviewed, and it will be clarified, in which ways civil society can enhance the legitimacy of democratic regimes. The second part will provide a range of empirical information on civil society in East-Central Europe, focusing on the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.[5] From a macro-perspective and along with its main structural, social and economic dimensions, the development of organisational structures of civil society since 1989 will be analysed and compared across the four countries. Against this empirical background, a third part will attempt an assessment of the potential civil societies in the region have to offer for enhancing democratic legitimacy.

Before entering this discussion, however, it is necessary to clear the definitional ground for the considerations to come. While there seems to be little controversy as to the meaning of legitimacy, civil society as a concept is endowed with a wide range of different and competing, frequently even contradictory meanings, primarily as a result of its long conceptual history as well as its recent and current

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[3] Ekiert & Kubik 1999 have observed that political parties and institutions, elite political behaviour and processes of economic restructuring have dominated much of the scholarly research on East-Central European democracies, while mass-level processes and political-cultural changes have attracted increased attention only relatively recently.

[4] Most comprehensively, the contribution of civil society to ending state-socialism has been treated by Tismaneanu 1992.

[5] The definition of East-Central Europe underlying this paper largely follows the historical conceptualisations postulated by Bibó 1992 and Szücs 1990. In these, the four countries scrutinised here form the essential part of East-Central Europe, complemented by the Baltic republics, parts of Romania and former Yugoslavia as well as East-Germany.

popularity.[6] As discussions of definitional questions have been undertaken elsewhere, suffice it to introduce a definition that can be considered appropriate and widely shared.[7] In its most concise form, this definition has been suggested by Philippe Schmitter, for whom "civil society can be defined as a set or system of self-organised intermediary groups that: (1) are relatively independent of both public authorities and private units of production and reproduction, that is, of firms and families; (2) are capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions in defence or promotion of their interests or passions; (3) do not seek to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and (4) agree to act within pre-established rules of a 'civil,' i.e. mutually respectful, nature."[8] It is civil society based on the four characteristics of *dual autonomy, collective action, non-usurpation* and *civility* that the following considerations will refer to.

Democratic Legitimacy and Civil Society

Ever since Max Weber, it has been acknowledged that the stability and functioning of any political regime is crucially dependent not only on the structure of its institutions but equally on the extent, to which it is socially and culturally anchored. This embeddedness is typically described as the legitimacy, or the informal dimension, of a political regime.[9] The new democracies of East-Central Europe are no exception to this rule. Instead, the process of democratic consolidation these regimes have undergone since 1989, in broader political science terms, their institutionalisation, has posed the twin challenge of establishing formal institutions and of underpinning them with wide-spread legitimacy. As noted above, it is in particular the latter challenge that has so far been met only insufficiently. Thus being one of the keys to democratic consolidation, legitimacy involves four crucial aspects.

Addressees of Legitimacy. Legitimacy relates to democracy in various ways: to democracy as a form of political regime as such, to specific political actors or institutions, and to the political community underlying a given democratic regime. In relation to democracy as such, legitimacy pronounces its superiority

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[6] Discussions of such different meanings can be found with, among others, Cohen & Arato 1992, Péréz-Díaz 1993 and Alexander 1998.

[7] In his forthcoming PhD thesis, the author of this paper provides an overview of the conceptual history of civil society, on the basis of which the definition adopted here is justified.

[8] Schmitter 1997: 240.

[9] Weber 1978: 213 postulates that "[e]xperience shows that in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy".

over alternative forms of political regimes. In a similarly comparative way, specific actors are set apart by their legitimacy from other players that are considered less or even illegitimate. The political community, or demos, upon which a democratic regime is based, can also be granted or denied legitimacy, depending on whether or not social fault lines exist that question the integrity of the polity. The sustainability of a democratic regime crucially hinges upon a basic measure of legitimacy on all three accounts.[10]

Sources of Legitimacy. Broadly, legitimacy is generated by two major sources. It may derive from an evaluation of the extent, to which a democratic regime is capable of tackling important social questions, such as security, social welfare or economic development.[11] While such substantial legitimacy primarily relates to the material outcomes yielded, procedural legitimacy is based on the political processes at work, acknowledges the value of their democratic nature, and accepts the fact that decisions made democratically may result in substantial outcomes that are only second best to individual preferences and interests.[12] In the long run, and given that outcomes generating substantial legitimacy are significantly dependent upon various external factors, democratic regimes can be sustained only if also legitimated procedurally.

Social Level of Legitimacy. Legitimacy for a democratic regime may be, and typically is, unevenly distributed between political, social, cultural and economic elites, on the one hand, and the broad populace, on the other. Although it seems compelling that, in order to be stable and vibrant, democracy particularly requires legitimacy among those elite actors that are closely involved with political decision and public opinion making, any democracy is likely to remain fledgling unless it also comes to be considered legitimate among the public at large.[13]

Expressions of Legitimacy. An important aspect of democratic legitimacy is its translation into specific behavioural patterns and attitudinal dispositions or, broadly, into a democratic political culture. In a more restricted form, legitimacy finds its expression in forms of behaviour marked by moderation, co-operation, bargaining and accommodation. As only these behavioural patterns are

[10] Such was the original typology developed by Easton, 1965.

[11] Representative of such a view are Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub & Limongi 1996.

[12] In post-authoritarian settings, procedural legitimacy also derives from comparison with the previous regime, as the rejection of the latter generates some support for new democracy; see O'Donnell 1995: 26.

[13] The central role of "politically significant groups" is highlighted by Burton, Gunther & Higley 1992: 323. In turn, the fact that mass level politics must not be neglected is emphasised by Diamond 1999: 68.

commensurate with democratic norms and procedures, their occurrence can be seen as the emergence of democratic legitimacy.[14] However, a more encompassing perspective argues that such behavioural patterns are not sustainable in the long run unless they come to be embedded in deeper attitudinal dispositions, such as tolerance, pragmatism, trust, willingness to compromise and civility. Accordingly, democratic legitimacy cannot be confined to the manner in which people act in a democratic regime but must also extend to the ways in which they think about it.[15] Democratic consolidation requires an adjustment of behavioural patterns in the short run, and a gradual democratisation of attitudes in the longer term.

On all these accounts, some measure of legitimacy is required if the democratic regime in question is to survive and thrive. A complete lack of legitimacy on one or more of them will confront democracy with existential questions. In turn, the vibrancy of democracy increases the more fully legitimacy can be achieved on the various accounts. It is with regard to enhancing legitimacy, along with at least some of the aspects mentioned, that civil society has been frequently highlighted as having potential. It is understood as performing a number functions within a democratic regime. The precise range of functions and the emphases placed on one or another among them naturally differ among authors.[16] It is, however, possible to derive five major functions, through which civil society contributes to building democratic legitimacy and thus to strengthening democracy as such.

Control of State Power. Ever since the early-modern distinction between public and private, the fragile balance between the two realms has necessitated arrangements that both guarantee the separation and regulate the interaction between them. Besides a range of other institutional precautions, such as inalienable individual rights, the rule of law or democratic procedures of decision-making, civil society has the capacity to act as an important additional watch-dog over the relationships between public and private, state and society.

On the one hand, it is by way of association in civil society that individuals increase their capacity to shield off state interference into social and individual life. More proactively, on the other hand, civil society also interacts directly to state and political actors. As intermediaries, associations of civil society operate in the public realm and are part of a complex system of checks and balances, they contribute to and share in decision-making processes and interact directly with government. By observing political processes, providing information to various publics and, if necessary, also mobilising these for or against particular political decisions, civil society holds government accountable to the democratic rules of

[14] Przeworski 1994 and Huntington 1991 limit legitimacy to this behavioural dimension.
[15] Diamond 1993: 10.
[16] Overviews of civil society's democratic functions are provided by the following authors: Bibic 1994; Schmitter 1997; Diamond 1999; Merkel 1999.

the game as well as responsible and responsive to societal concerns. In this capacity, civil society primarily generates democratic legitimacy vis-à-vis specific institutions and actors, the public at large and in procedural form.[17]

Interest Mediation. If the outlined control function mainly relates to the modes of decision-making and enforcement, this second function of civil society rather addresses the content of such decisions. What is at stake is the problematic translation of the competing and conflicting interests, beliefs, values and passions to be found in modern societies into publicly binding decisions. While the central mechanism for the representation of social interests to the political system have traditionally been political parties, civil society can play an important supplementary role. It can compensate for the deficiencies of interest representation that result from a number of functional constraints political parties face, such as vote maximisation and electoral cycles.[18] As a result, the pluralism of social interests can be represented more fully, specifically and continuously. Beyond representation, civil society can also contribute to the mediation of conflicting interests, as it provides arenas, where competing social groups and interests interact directly and arrive at settlements on more specialised disputes.[19]

As a supplementary channel for the representation and mediation of social interests, civil society thus potentially contributes to a more differentiated system of governance, which in turn is more commensurate with the increasing social pluralism of contemporary societies. It allows for a wider spectrum of interests to be articulated, aggregated and mediated and thus for decision-making processes, which more closely reflect social reality. In terms of democratic legitimacy, civil society can provide an additional impetus to both procedural and substantial legitimacy, by opening decision-making to a wider range of interests and by contributing to policies that are compatible with the vital interests of different social groups.

Social Integration. Distinct from the previous functions, which relate to the political processes of decision-making, this third function shifts the focus towards social relationships and social cohesion. No political community is sustainable unless the society forming its basis is held together by some measure of social integration overarching the differences among, firstly, individuals and, secondly, social groups and containing the disruptive potential generated by these differences. Civil society has the capacity to contribute to social integration in a twofold manner.

A first moment of this function relates to the integration of individuals into social groups. Civil society provides a space for individuals to combine on the

[17] Recent examples in East-Central Europe are the Civic Campaign OK '98, which led to the electoral success of the opposition to Meciar in Slovakia, and certainly the conflict around public television in the Czech Republic in 2001.

[18] Lehmbruch 1979.

[19] Such arenas have come to be known as "concertation regime[s];" see Schmitter 1992.

basis of a shared interest, belief or passion. Perceived commonality between individuals and their translation into the associations of civil society makes distinct social groups materialise, integrate and shape collective identities. The co-existence of numerous social groups, which is inherent to the pluralism of modern societies, leads to the second moment, through which civil society contributes to social integration. Societies are usually characterised by a number of deeply entrenched cleavages, which give rise to social conflict and, in the worst case, threaten the integrity of society. It is with regard to such fault lines that civil society has a mitigating effect. The same individuals that come together in an association on the basis of one interest, differ along with many other features and passions; this is a function of the multiple nature of their identities. Associations thus also confront significant diversity among their members and, in the name of one interest, bridge other differences and social cleavages. Pluralists have argued time and again that this has moderating effects on both individuals and associations or social groups. By way of cross-cutting social cleavages, civil society defuses their explosive potential and contributes to the integration of society at large.[20] Through this function, civil society has thus the capacity to enhance the integrity and, as a result, the legitimacy of the social and political community underlying a given democratic regime.

Political Socialisation. This fourth function of civil society relates to political culture, understood here broadly as the attitudinal and behavioural dispositions of individuals towards the formal rules, institutional structures and incumbent office-holders of the political regime they live in. To a significant extent, the vibrancy or vulnerability of democracy depends on whether or not these dispositions are commensurate with democratic norms. Civil society is an important agent for anchoring a democratic political culture.

Ever since Tocqueville, it has been emphasised that "associations may […] be considered as large free schools, where all the members of the community go to learn the general theory of association."[21] Immediate and frequent participation of individuals in the associations of civil society inculcates citizens with an understanding of the workings of democracy and training of their skills therein. They acquire a greater sense of political efficacy as a result of the successful pursuit of interests by way of association. They develop a willingness to combine with others and to accept the necessity of compromise resulting from such co-operation. In short, it is through immediate personal experience facilitated by civil society that individuals become democratically cultivated. In providing an additional space for the democratic socialisation of individuals, civil society can

[20] See the exemplary work of Truman 1951: 157, 508-514; Lipset 1969: 211ff. More recently, the result of overlapping memberships in various associations has been coined "social capital"; see Putnam 1993.

[21] Tocqueville 1994: vol. 2, 116.

affect the cultural, informal side of democratic regimes and assures that democratic legitimacy finds its translation in adequate behavioural and attitudinal patterns, among social and political elites as well as on the mass level of the general public.

Service Provision. This last function relates to the contribution civil society can make to the material output of an overall social and political system. Generally, this output comprises a vast range of goods and services necessary, if not essential, for individuals, sections of the population, or the social and political community in its entirety. The majority of these individual and social needs are satisfied through the combined activity of the public sector of the state and private economic markets. However, situations occur frequently, in which the state and the market are limited in their capacity to provide for a range of, usually quasi-public, goods. It is in such situations that civil society can play an important compensatory function.

The two scenarios of market failure and contract failure put constraints on a commercial supply of a number of goods, be it that they are of a collective nature, as in the former case, or be it that they are characterised by their complex nature, such as health or education. These deficiencies have oftentimes led to state intervention, through regulatory measures or direct provision of such goods and services. However, the state's capacity in this respect is also constrained. Firstly, there is a tension between the need to legitimise state activity by democratic majorities and the diverse demands of various social minorities. Frequently, state provision remains unresponsive to the needs of particular social groups, such as religious minorities. Secondly, state supply of specific goods and services is implemented through the rule-bound, publicly accountable, centralised and hierarchical structures of public administration. This bureaucratisation, however, limits the flexibility of public suppliers to respond to changing needs and to experiment with alternative solutions. State provision thus satisfies social demands insufficiently in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

The combined effect of these constraints on the performance of markets and states is a situation, in which various public or collective goods and services are not or not sufficiently available to society. Civil society organisations combine a non-profit with a non-governmental character. This enables them to overcome the structural constraints resulting in the failure of markets and states to satisfy social demands for specific goods and services, most typically in the areas of health, education and social welfare. Hence, civil society can play a compensatory and supplementary role, contribute to the material output of democratic regimes and, as a result, increase their efficiency.[22] This relates

[22] This democratic function of civil society has been particularly highlighted by research on non-profit organisations. For overviews, see Powell 1987; Rose-Ackerman 1989; Anheier & Seibel 1990; Powell & Clemens 1998.

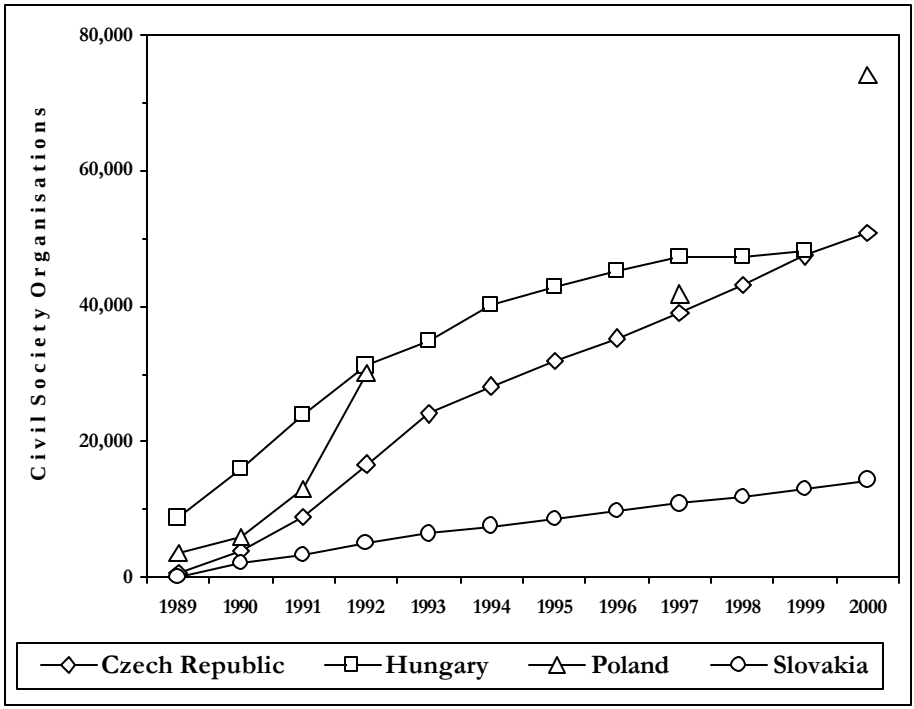
directly and positively to the substantial legitimacy a democratic regime is endowed with.

From this overview, it becomes obvious that, through its various democratic functions, civil society has the potential to significantly strengthen the legitimacy of democratic regimes. In the context of the new democracies of East-Central Europe, then, the question arises as to which extent civil societies that can meet the expectations flowing from the preceding theoretical considerations have developed since 1989.

Civil Society in East-Central Europe since 1989: Vibrancy vs. Vulnerability

When the state-socialist regimes in the region began to crumble around 1989, one of the primary demands of the democratic opposition and consequently one of the first outcomes of the reform process was the reinstitution of the basic civil rights of assembly and association. With these rights, the gates were once again opened for the free and unconstrained, legally and institutionally guaranteed development of civil society in the countries of East-Central Europe. The extent of social energy unleashed and translated into organisational structures of civil society is illustrated by the following figure.

Figure 1 – Organisational Growth of Civil Society in East-Central Europe 1989-2000



Source: For the Czech and Slovak Republics, *Albertina Firemní Monitor*; for Hungary, KSH Central Statistical Office, *Nonprofit szervezetek Magyarországon*; for Poland, GUS Central Statistical Office, REGON.

Notes: Figures for civil society organisations refer foundations, associations, nonprofit institutes and public-benefit companies. Excluded from this figure are organisational units of associations and organisations primarily devoted to religious worship.

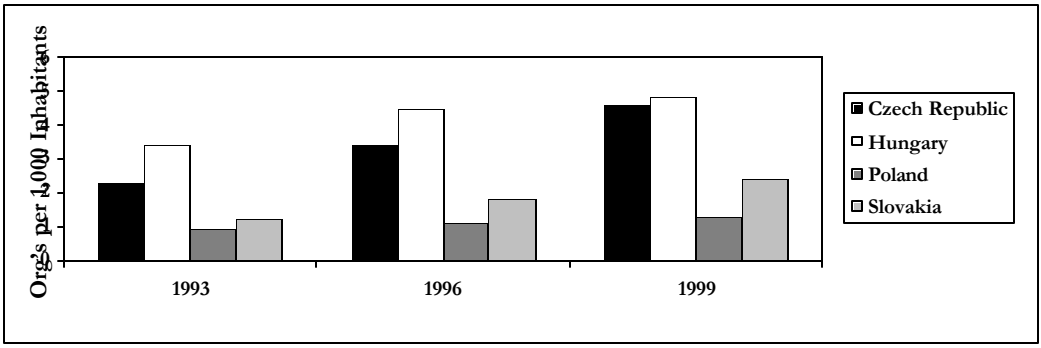
The first decade of democracy in East-Central Europe witnessed a remarkable upsurge of civic initiative, indicated here through officially registered organisations.[23] Taking its departure from formal non-existence, an organisational realm that numbers tens of thousands of organisations emerged in all four countries. While this general development can be observed in all four countries, the figures also point to largely differential dynamics of development across the four countries. In Hungary, in particular, the rapid development during the early years was followed by a slowing-down of civil society growth since the mid-1990s. Declining growth rates appear to indicate a consolidation of civil society as an organisational realm, characterised by a further development and strengthening of existing organisations rather than the establishment of new ones. In the remaining three countries, in turn, civil society continues to significantly grow in numbers, more steadily in the Czech and Slovak Republics, still rapidly in Poland. In these countries, large numbers of new organisations continue to emerge and signal that civil society is apparently still a far cry from organisational stabilisation.

Apart from these initial observations, however, such accounts of registered organisations are very limited in their empirical evidence. This is particularly obvious when taking into account that the countries of the region differ vastly in the size of their populations.[24] In order to assess the size of emerging civil societies comparatively across the region, organisational density is a more appropriate indicator. Figure 2 illustrates how civil societies in the four countries developed and compare in relation to the size of the populace.

[23] Here, registration refers not only to the legal registration with courts or public authorities but also to registration with statistical offices.

[24] Poland numbers approx. 38 million, the Czech Republic and Hungary about 10 million, and Slovakia approx. 5 million inhabitants.

Figure 2 – Organisational Density of Civil Society in East-Central Europe



Sources: As Figure 1 above.

Viewed from this perspective, it appears that the emerging civil societies have come to develop in differing directions. On the one hand, the Czech Republic and Hungary have achieved comparably high rates of organisational density. Poland and Slovakia, on the other hand, witnessed a development of civil society on much lower levels of organisational density, with the former increasingly lagging behind the three other countries of the region. Most of all, these observations shed some light on the fact that, for the development of an organisationally dense civil society, the basic legal guarantees outlined earlier are a necessary, yet not sufficient, condition. By 1990, as argued above, these guarantees had been put in place in all four countries referred to in this piece. Nonetheless, their introduction resulted in vastly different organisational densities of civil society.

In both absolute and relative terms, the growth of civil society have been extraordinarily positive across the new democracies of East-Central Europe. Such an evaluation can be further substantiated by a brief comparison with civil societies in older, established democracies. At the end of the 1990s, civil society in the US comprised approx. 850,000 organisations, while in Germany more than 550,000 entities were registered in 2001. The resulting densities of civil society in both countries are 3.4 and 6.7 organisations per 1,000 inhabitants, respectively. In comparison to these figures, the countries of East-Central Europe generally fare relatively well. The Czech Republic and Hungary boast civil societies that are very comparable in size to those Western democracies mentioned. Poland and Slovakia, in turn, dispose of civil societies, whose organisational penetration is still well below those countries of reference.

The described numerical revival was accompanied by a significant pluralisation of organisational types. Initially, two main types of civil society organisations

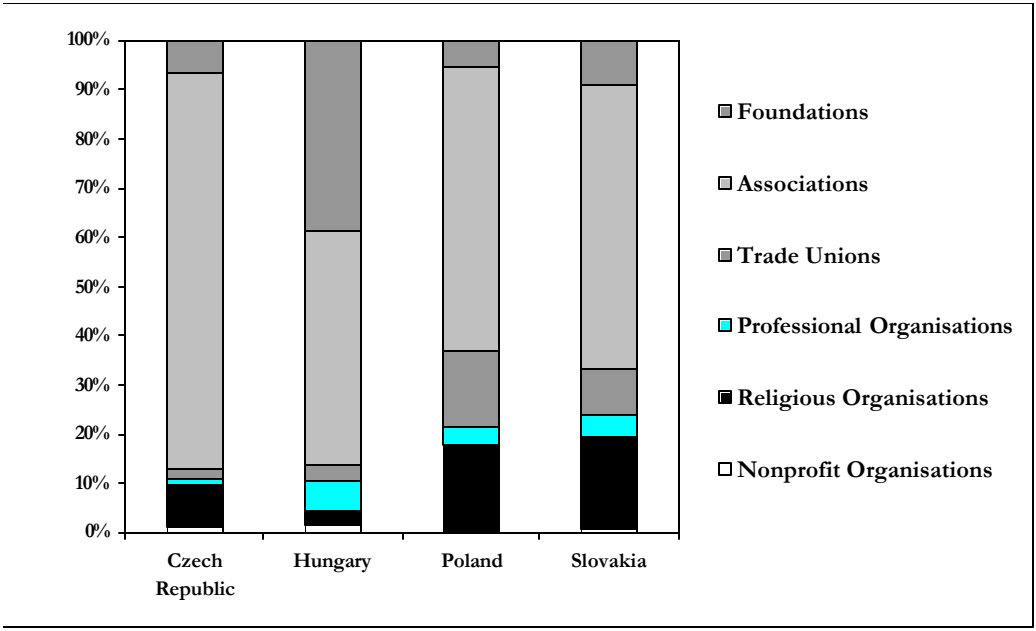
had been established, namely associations and foundations. Gradually, the countries of the region amended their legislation and provided regulations for a number of additional organisational types. These fall broadly into two groups. On the one hand, all countries were typically faced with various organisations of a more traditional nature that, due to their specific status or purpose, required separate legal treatment. Most prominently, these include religious organisations and trade unions. Various individual organisations, such as the national Red Cross associations, have been regulated by specific legal acts, sometimes also applying to groups of organisations, such as those representing hunters and fishermen in Poland and Slovakia, but also allotment gardeners and voluntary fire brigades in Poland.[25]

On the other hand, additional organisational types were introduced in some of the countries, usually with the intention of enabling civil society to perform more effectively some of the functions outlined earlier. Two of these appear to have been of particular importance for the further organisational pluralisation: professional self-government and provision of selected public services. In the area of professional self-government, all countries of the region adopted a chamber system. Usually mandatory in membership, chambers are organised along with specific professions, such as lawyers, physicians or accountants. They serve both the external representation of the interests of the occupational group in question and the internal regulation of professional performance. A comparable trend towards transferring public responsibilities can be discerned with regard to the provision of public goods and services. With the intention of entrusting civil society with the, at least partial, satisfaction of social demands for various services, a specialised type of non-profit organisation, usually referred to as public benefit company, has been introduced in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, while having been under consideration for several years in Poland[26]. These legal amendments have led to a significant differentiation of civil society along with a variety of organisational types. The legal and structural pluralisation of civil societies in East-Central Europe is illustrated by the following figure.

[25] On Poland, see Johann 1995: 15 and BORDO 1998: 54; on Slovakia, see SAIA-SCTS 1998.

[26] After several previous attempts, a draft law on the public benefit status (uzytecznosc publiczna) entered the legislative process in Poland in December 2001.

igure 3 - Types of Civil Society Organisations in East-Central Europe 2000



ource: Data for the Czech and Slovak Republics, from Albertina Firemní Monitor; for Hungary, from KSH 2001: 91; for Poland, from REGON 2000.

ote: Data for Hungary refers to 1999. Czech data does not yet entail changes to the foundation secto

Obviously, heterogeneity of organisational forms that has been increasingly characteristic of civil society in East-Central Europe since 1989. In the first place, this differentiation contrasts starkly with the monolithic structure of social organisations existent during state-socialism. Taking its departure from the homogeneity of National Front and social organisations, civil society has become a highly pluralistic organisational realm. In addition to the quantitative growth outlined earlier, civil societies in the region have also advanced qualitatively, as a variety of organisational forms has made them more commensurate with the various democratic functions outlined previously.

However, the perspective presented so far, however, represents but the most optimistic scenario of the development of civil society in East-Central Europe. As many a less enthusiastic observer has noted, a range of empirical evidence can be held against this view and draws a much less rosy picture. The objections raised against the above perspective, and the empirical material employed, pertain to four main problems, namely the question of nominal vs. actual organisational strength, the existence of an important structural legacy inherited after the previous regime, the embeddedness of civil society within its broader

social environment, and the economic significance of this realm. It is these questions that have given rise to much disagreement among scholars (as well as practitioners) as to whether civil societies in the region are to be assessed as vibrant or vulnerable. Besides illustrating this dissent, an inquiry of the problem areas mentioned also helps to arrive at a more realistic picture of strengths and weaknesses of civil society in the four countries.

Nominal and Actual Strength. The first problem originates in the nature of the empirical information usually utilised to analyse the development and strength of civil society (this study so far being no exception). Comprehensive data is typically available only with those public authorities, which are responsible for the registration and regulation of civil society, commonly courts, public administration and statistical offices. Although significant differences exist between these sources and the empirical information they contain, one principal difficulty is shared by them and lies in the fact that they reflect a largely nominal value. With very few exceptions, official registration is mandatory for civil society organisations, in order to attain legal personality, in order to qualify for a preferential tax status, or simply in order to open a bank account. Thus all those organisations that actually function in civil society are registered in one way or another. The reverse logic, however, is much less obvious, since no obligation applies to de-registration once an organisation ceases to function or to exist. Civil society as reflected in registration figures is essentially "sentenced to growth," not allowing for any evaluation as to whether an organisation is active, inactive or not in existence any longer.[27] It is for this reason that accounts of civil society based on registration figures ought to be considered merely as a, to some degree fictitious, upper limit.

In turn, one can also rely upon a number of estimates provided by umbrella organisations of civil society, various data bases, observers and experts of the field in order to assess the scope of functioning organisations, or the actual strength of civil society in the region. One overview provides estimates ranging from about seven percent active organisations in the Czech Republic to fifteen in Poland and Slovakia to about thirty percent in Hungary.[28] The principal problem with such estimates is usually that they are based on a narrower understanding of civil society than the one adopted in this study, featuring more explicitly a public benefit orientation. Typically, a variety of organisations are excluded, such as trade unions and professional organisations, often also religious-based structures,

[27] BORDO 1998: 25.

[28] Hyatt et al. 1998 : 7 provides the following figures of registered and active civil society organisations: in the Czech Republic – 34,000, of which 2,500 active, in Hungary – 46,000/15,000-20,000, in Poland – 17,000/2,500, and in Slovakia – 17,500/2,000-2,500. Similar estimates can be found with USAID 1999. István Sebestényi of the Hungarian statistical office identified a discrepancy of 50,000 active organisations compared to 63,000 registered ones as of 2002.

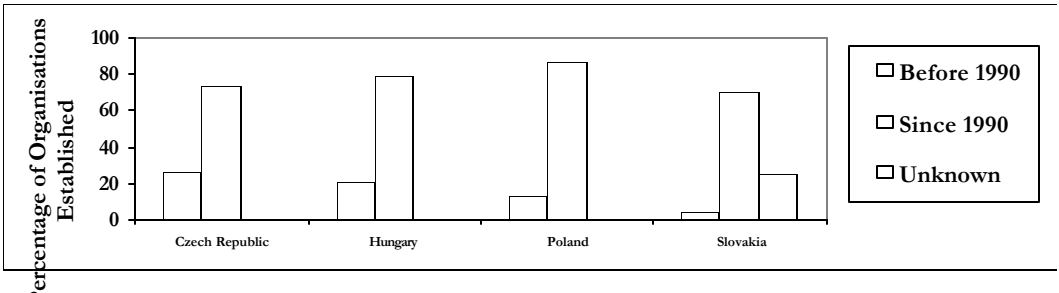
not seldom also voluntary fire brigades, sports clubs and hobby associations. Questionable as this narrower concept of civil society may be, these estimates further substantiate the observation that actual organisational activity of civil society is well below the nominal levels of registration data. Where the latter delineates an upper limit of civil society, the former can be little more than a bottom line of organisational activity in East-Central Europe. The not unproblematic nature of these figures and estimates notwithstanding, they put a damper on an overly enthusiastic view of civil society in the region, which one may be tempted to take when considering registered entities. Nominal and actual intensity of organisational activity obviously and considerably diverge.

A Structural Legacy. A second problem arising around civil society in the region is the question of continuity and innovation of organisational structures. Accounts of civil society in East-Central Europe frequently emphasise the upsurge of civil society since 1989, yet they fail to appreciate the significance of organisational inheritances. State-socialist regimes in the region had by no means been devoid of forms of social organisation. A range of organisations and activities had been permitted, although incorporated into the centralised and hierarchical structures of the regime and subject to the surveillance of the authorities. While some of these served the exclusive purpose of political mobilisation, a good many others evaded any significant politicisation, in particular those that served leisure-time activities. Comprehensive organisational structures thus existed, they disposed of considerable material resources, and their membership encompassed significant portions of the population. With 1989, these social organisations were faced with an inevitable transformation. Many, although not all, of those entities that were overwhelmingly political in nature and closely associated with the previous regime disappeared. The large and less compromised remainder, however, continued to exist as independent organisations after the centralised structures they had once been part of disintegrated.[29] This transformation necessarily entailed the adoption of a new legal format and, most commonly, these older organisations re-emerged as citizens' associations.[30] A first indication of this element of organisational continuity within civil society is provided by the following figures.

[29] Fric 2001: 81 notes this mechanism of disintegration, organisational independence and formal adoption of a new legal status.

[30] Exemplarily, this is substantiated by empirical evidence provided for Hungary by Kuti 1996: 117ff. and for Poland by BORDO 1998: 31.

Figure 4 – Civil Society Organisations by Period of Establishment



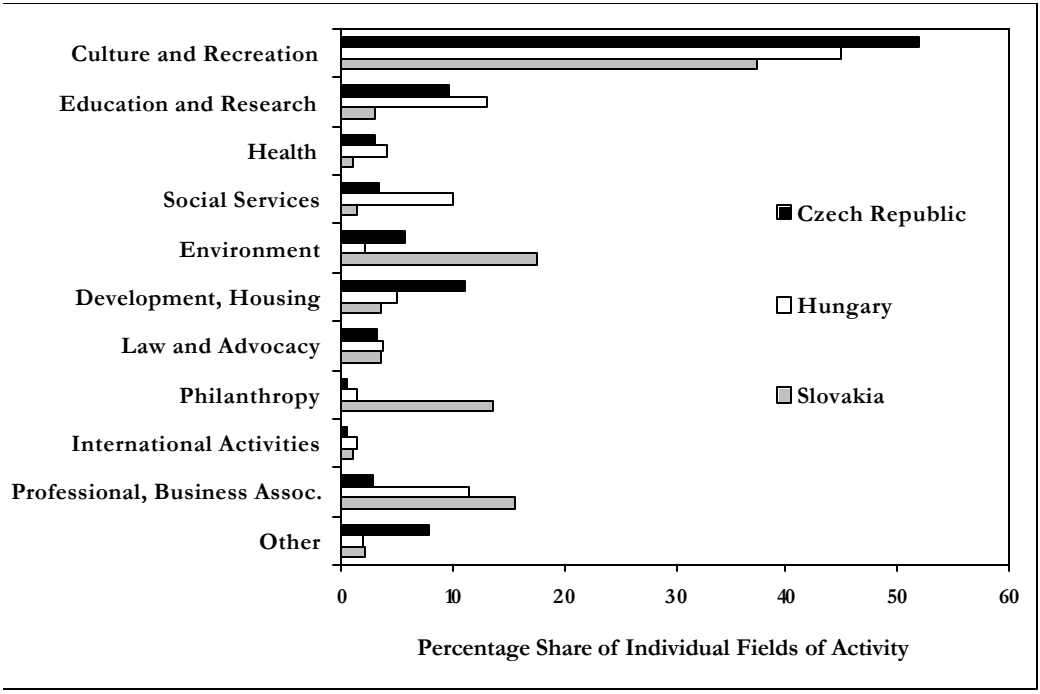
Source: For the Czech Republic, Fric 1998: 68; for Hungary, KSH 1998: 20; for Poland, BORDO 1998: 26f,; and for Slovakia, Bútora et al. 1997: 214.

Note: Data refer to 1997 for the Czech Republic, to 1996 for Hungary and Slovakia, and to 1995 for Poland.

With the possible exception of Slovakia, whose large share of unspecified cases defies closer analysis, all countries of the region exhibit a considerable element of organisational continuity, accounting for between one seventh of civil society organisations in Poland and one fourth in the Czech Republic. This observation remains valid, even if one accounts for the fact that, in Hungary and Poland, the unconstrained re-emergence of civil society had already begun in 1989, while the cut-off point for the above figures is 1990. While in Poland, one could attribute some of these pre-1989 origins of civil society to the existence of an extensive independent society, the Czech Republic and Hungary largely escape such an explanation. The fact that in both these countries a large portion of civil society organisations had been established before the regime change, as indicated in the above figures, points to the importance of transformed social organisations for civil society in the region.[31] However, on the basis of the evidence presented so far, it is not possible to more clearly assess the extent, to which civil societies in the region have been shaped by the transformation of social organisations. Such a closer identification of the structural legacy within civil society is possible by considering the fields of activity covered by civil society organisations. Figure 5 provides such an overview.

[31] For the Czech Republic, some explicit empirical evidence is available on this subject. Fric 1998: 67f. reports that, in a 1998 survey, 17.8 percent of organisations reported to have gained independence after 1990, usually from the centralised structures of the National Front scheme. Given the late date of this survey, it is likely that the significance of this legacy was much higher immediately after 1989.

Figure 5 – Civil Society Organisations by Fields of Activity 1996



Sources: Data for the Czech Republic, from Goulli et al. 2001: 143; for Hungary, from KSH 1998: 18; for Slovakia, from Petrášová 2000: 65, and own calculations.

Note: Figures for the Czech Republic refer to 1995. Original figures for the Czech Republic and Slovakia included denominational organisations primarily devoted to religious worship; these were excluded from the present figures.

What is most obvious from these figures is the extent, to which civil societies in East-Central Europe are dominated by the area of culture and recreation. Although not included in the above figure, Poland is no exception to this rule, as additional sources reveal.[32] Across the four countries, forty to fifty percent of organisations are active in this field, thus by far outnumbering any other field of activity. This characteristic of East-Central European civil societies is clearly conditioned by the organisational inheritance after the previous regime. It was precisely with regard to leisure-time, recreational and cultural activities that state-socialist authorities had permitted and supported vibrant organisational structures and refrained from overly controlling and politicising them. The

[32] These have not been included due to methodological differences, see Les & Nalecz 2001.

transformation of these apolitical social organisations can be considered the principal reason behind this emphasis on culture and recreation. This observation does not, however, mean that all those structures in the field of culture and recreation derive from old social organisations. Instead, a good many new organisations has been established for such activities since 1989. Nor does this evidence imply that the significance of this structural legacy is confined to culture and recreation. Although less obvious from the above figures, generally to a lesser extent and with differing significance across the four countries, similar transformations have occurred in other fields of activity as well. A prime example are communist trade unions which, in all four countries, retained their organisational structures.[33] Similarly, traditional structures of voluntary fire brigades had existed before and have continued to function since 1989.[34] Various groups of organisations, such as hunters, fishermen, allotment gardeners, as well as several individual entities had not only been inherited but were considered of such a social significance that they became regulated by specific legislation, as mentioned above. Finally, a range of individual cases of organisational transformation can be found in almost all fields of activity listed above. A significant organisational legacy has thus left clear traces on the current shape of civil society in East-Central Europe.

The observed characteristic of civil society in the region having a strong cultural and recreational emphasis is particularly striking in comparison with more established democracies, where the fields of education, health and social services are pronounced more strongly.[35] In East-Central Europe, the relative weakness of these areas of organisational activity is a clear function of the doctrine of Soviet-type regimes that endowed the state with a far-reaching monopoly for the provision of education, health, and social welfare. Consequently, civil society organisations in these areas had to be established anew, without much reliance upon existing structures. To a large extent, the same problem applied to the remaining fields of activity listed above, which had been either within the exclusive realm of public authorities, such as development and housing, or which had been absent, such as law and advocacy or environmental concerns. Against this unfavourable background, civil societies in the region adopted a wide range of activities and became remarkably differentiated beyond

[33] The once monopolistic trade unions that transformed after 1989 are the Czech *CMKOS* (Czech and Moravian Chamber of Trade Unions), the Hungarian *MSZOSZ* (Confederation of Hungarian Trade Unions), and the Polish *OPZZ* (Polish Confederation of Trade Unions).

[34] In the above figures, voluntary fire brigades are grouped under social services. They number about 1,300 in the Czech Republic, about 1,000 in Hungary, about 3,000 in Slovakia, and about 19,000 in Poland (see Czech Ministry of the Interior 2002, Kuti 1996: 82, Petrašová 2000: 66, and GUS 1998: 65).

[35] For this comparison, see Salamon et al. 1999.

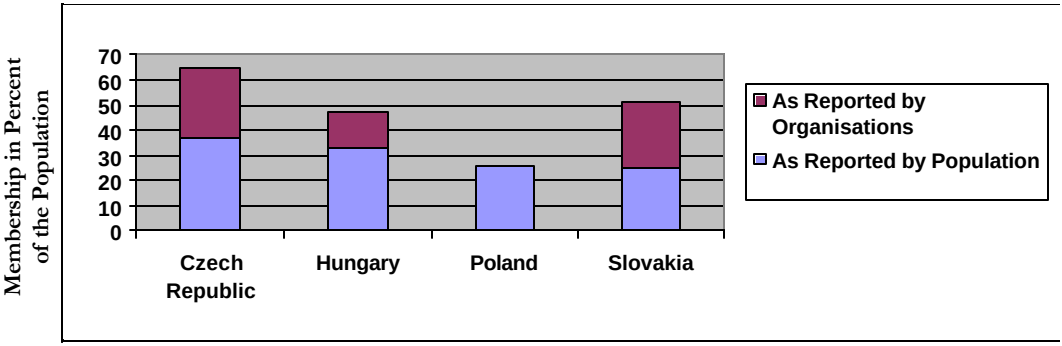
the inherited emphasis on culture and recreation. Additional strongholds have become visible in the area of education and research, professional associations and trade unions, while the representation of civil society in the important realms of health and social services has remained rather patchy.

These gradual changes notwithstanding, and as growth dynamics across fields of activity show, the organisational legacy described remains a significant characteristic of civil society in East-Central Europe. Contrary to the widespread view, this realm has not emerged from a void after 1989 but, to a considerable extent, grew out of existing social organisations by way of transformation. Less significantly, and less confined to specific fields of activity, civil society in the region also incorporated those forms of independent activity that had asserted themselves before 1989. None of these claims is to disparage the social energy that fired the re-emergence of civil society. However, this legacy and its implications must not be underestimated and certainly put the impressive upsurge of organised civic life since 1989 into slightly clearer proportion.

Social Embeddedness. A third note of caution with regard to civil society in East-Central stems from the anchoring of civic structures in their broader social environment. After all, civil society is a reflection of society at large, translating social pluralism into organisational structures. Derivative from this nature of civil society is the assumption that this realm is only as strong as is its anchoring in society. Consequently, one cannot but explore and attempt to assess the embeddedness of this realm in the societies of East-Central Europe, not least since problematic questions also arise in this respect and have been frequently pointed out by observers.

The most conventional indicator for the social significance of civil society is membership. Although not all organisational forms evolve around the notion of membership, such as foundations, the vast majority of civil society structures are indeed, as shown above, associations of individuals. A first indication of the social embeddedness of civil society in East-Central Europe is therefore given by the accumulated membership in organisations of this realm. The following figure provides such an overview.

Figure 6 – Membership in Civil Society in East-Central Europe 1995/1998



Sources: Data for the Czech Republic, from Kroupa & Mansfeldová: 1997: 178; for Hungary, from Angelusz & Tardos 1999: 260; for Poland, from Nalecz 2001: 24; for Slovakia, from Bútora et al. 1997: 227.

Note: Data for the Czech Republic refers to 1995, for Hungary to 1997, for Poland to 1998, and for Slovakia to 1996.

Based on survey evidence, these figures illustrate that about one fourth of the population declare membership in civil society organisations in Poland and Slovakia, one third in Hungary and slightly above that in the Czech Republic. These low levels point to a significant fragility of civil society with regard to its social anchoring as, depending on the country, half and more of the population are not members of any organisation. With these high rates of passivity, the civil societies in East-Central Europe contrast starkly with many an established democracy, from the United States and Canada to the United Kingdom and Germany, whose non-membership rates range between one fifth and one third of the population.[36] The primary explanation for this weakness lies in the fact that, under the previous regime, membership in a range of social organisations was essentially obligatory for each and every individual; it was one of the rituals required under the "social contract." What this compulsion to membership triggered after 1989 was, on part of a broad section of society, a wholesale aversion against any formal commitment to organisations of society. This

[36] According to the World Values Survey (1990 wave), non-membership rates in the countries mentioned are as follows: United States – 18 percent, Canada – 35 percent, United Kingdom – 47 percent, (West) Germany – 32 percent. With their low rates, such as Poland's 65 percent, the countries of the East-Central Europe find themselves on par with those Western democracies that are well-known for their, to follow Fukuyama 1995, "familial" character, such as France and Italy, with 61 and 64 percent non-membership in civil society (see Szawiel 2001: 159). For a more detailed analysis that arrives at similar conclusions, see Howard 2000.

aversion found its expression in a mass exodus of people from organisations they had belonged to so far, and a widespread abstention from joining any new organisation. The regained freedom to form and join associations could also be seen as the freedom not to join any organisation, and significant parts of the societies in East-Central Europe have made extensive use of this right.[37] From further sources available, however, it appears that the social reluctance towards membership in civil society is gradually changing. Survey data for the Czech Republic and Hungary indicates that, after a sharp decline in membership rates until the mid-1990s, people have increasingly begun to join civic organisations again.[38] By contrast, Poland and Slovakia have so far witnessed a more stagnant situation with persistently lower levels of membership.[39]

However, a characterisation of the social embeddedness of civil society in East-Central Europe on the sole basis of membership would be incomplete. First of all, not all civil society organisations are based on membership. A significant portion of civil society, encompassing between five percent of organisations in Poland and forty percent in Hungary, evades an assessment along these lines.[40] Since the vast majority of these non-membership organisations, most prominently foundations, have come into being only after 1989, their inclusion into the social perspective of the present considerations may provide additional insights to the above observation of a structural legacy. Furthermore, if it has been claimed that membership as a formal commitment to an organisation meets with a significant social reluctance, it is necessary to explore other patterns of involvement in civil society, and thus its social embeddedness, which may not fall into this trap.

gainst this background, volunteerism in civil society is often used to further describe social anchoring of this realm. Not only is volunteerism an often cited constituent racteristic of civil society, in particular in its non-profit capacity, but empirical lence also demonstrates clearly that volunteers are an important resource that most anisations rely on in their activity. At the same time, volunteering does not necessarily ly membership and thus opens a possibility of involvement in civil society without nal commitment to a given organisation. The extent, to which this possibility is reciated, shows in the fact that 28 percent of Czech volunteers are not members of the anisation they work for, with the equivalent figures being 24 percent in Hungary and

[37] Howard 2000.

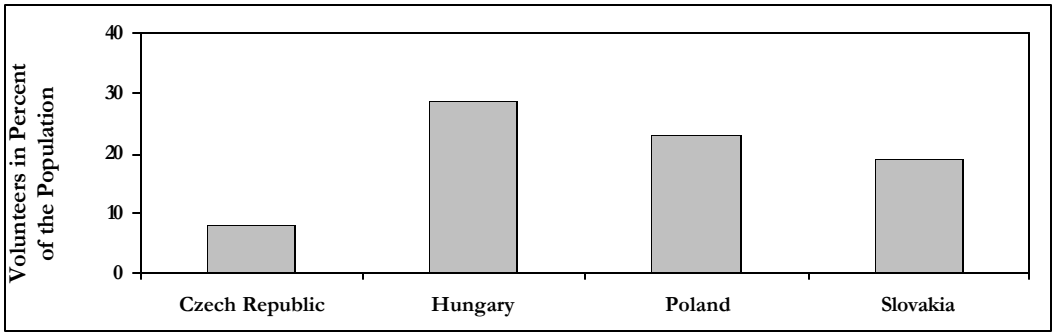
[38] For the Czech Republic, see Kroupa & Mansfeldová 178; for Hungary, KSH 1996: 44; KSH 1997: 91; KSH 1998: 104; KSH 1999: 143; KSH 2000: 140; KSH 2001: 47.

[39] Les & Nalecz 2001: 30.

[40] See Figure 3 above.

percent in Slovakia.[41] Volunteerism thus broadens the perspective beyond nbership and provides a second angle for assessing the social embeddedness of civil iety. The following figure illustrates volunteerism in the region on an aggregate el.

Figure 7 – Volunteering in Civil Society in East-Central Europe



Sources: Data for the Czech Republic, from Fric 2001: 62; for Hungary, from KSH 1995: 9; f Poland, from CBOS 1998; for Slovakia, from Demes & Bútora 1999: 613.

Note: Given the lack of alternative sources, the data presented cover a relatively long time span, a they are therefore to be interpreted with much caution. Data refers to the year 2000 for t Czech Republic, to 1993 for Hungary, to 1998 for Poland, and to 1997 for Slovakia.

Against the preceding considerations of the organisational need for volunteerism as well as its individually non-committal character, it appears that volunteerism in East-Central Europe has so far remained at surprisingly low levels. At the end of the 1990s, the share of the public declaring volunteer involvement was about one fourth in Poland and one fifth in Slovakia, while it reached a dramatically low rate of 8 percent in the Czech Republic. For Hungary, a 1993 survey indicated a significantly higher level of volunteerism, reaching 28.7 percent of the population. However, the trend in that country has indicated a steady decrease of volunteerism ever since.[42] In Slovakia, by contrast, dynamics of volunteer

[41] Data from Fric et al. 2001: 63, KSH 1995: 22, and Bútora & Fialová 1995: 66, respectively. Figures refer to 1997 for the Czech Republic, to 1993 for Hungary, and to 1994 for Slovakia.

[42] For the survey cited, see KSH 1995: 9. According to the annual reports of the Hungarian Statistical Office, volunteerism as indicated by civil society organisations steadily fell from about 500,000 in 1995 to roughly 300,000

behaviour appear to have taken an opposite course, as volunteerism increased from 13 percent in 1995 to 19 percent in 1997.[43] Largely stable levels of volunteerism have been reported from Poland, since 1998 oscillating around 23 percent, while no dynamic assessments can be drawn from the empirical evidence for the Czech Republic.[44] In the light of these figures, it becomes clear that volunteerism in East-Central Europe has so far remained relatively weak, verging on marginal importance in the Czech Republic. This weakness is particularly obvious through a comparison with established democracies. During the 1990s, voluntary activities were reported by 65 percent of US citizens, while the EU average is about 30 percent of the population.[45]

The comparably thinner volunteer base in East-Central Europe, however, restricts a resource of utmost importance, for civil society at large, as well as for all those organisations that have been established more recently. Among the latter are all those organisational forms that are not based on membership, first and foremost foundations, and which therefore cannot draw on the support of a stable constituency of members. In addition, the limited extent of volunteerism also affects many new membership organisations since, as argued earlier, these face significant social reluctance. In either case, the input of volunteers assumes particular importance, and any restrictions to it have especially impeding effects on the overall performance of civil society.

Although with slight differences across the four countries, the social embeddedness of civil society has thus so far remained fledgling in East-Central Europe. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that the low levels of civic participation, indicated here through membership and volunteering in civil society, are highly unevenly distributed within societies. In spatial terms, regions with dense organisational networks, most prominently capital cities, contrast with areas essentially devoid of any significant civic life. In social terms, participation is also skewed, typically in favour of the better educated strata and people who actively practice their religion. Age groups differ highly in their involvement with civil society. The size of the given settlement embodies a further factor influencing civic participation, with glaring weaknesses in settlements that

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people in 1999; compare KSH 1997: 31, KSH 1998: 39, KSH 1999: 140, KSH 2000: 43, and KSH 2001: 210.

[43] Demeš & Bútora 1998: 641.

[44] For Poland, see Les & Nalecz 2001: 25 and, for a similar assessment, the time series provided by CBOS 2002.

[45] Demeš & Bútora 1998: 641. A comprehensive and comparative study carried out by the UK-based National Centre for Volunteering in 1994 arrived at the following levels of volunteerism in European countries: Belgium – 32 percent, Denmark – 28 percent, Germany – 18 percent, Ireland – 25 percent, Netherlands – 38 percent, Sweden – 36 percent, and United Kingdom – 34 percent; see Gaskin & Smith 1997: 28.

exceed village size but do not reach larger urban proportions.[46] Another characteristic of the emerging civil societies is a significant social imbalance, that is that the participation of certain social groups in civil society is particularly weak, while for others, it is substantially stronger. Both the quantitative weakness and the qualitative disproportions civil societies have come to exhibit since 1989, however, arouse problematic questions for their influence upon democracy.

Economic Significance. Fourthly and lastly, civil society's importance in economic terms puts a damper on an overly enthusiastic view of this realm in East-Central Europe. At first glance, the adoption of an economic perspective may be somewhat surprising, even considered inappropriate, given the frequently highlighted normative value of civil society. However, in the definition adopted here, civil society comprises of organisational structures, which dispose of financial, material and human resources, inevitably incur costs to be budgeted for, sometimes place investments, often employ staff and produce material outcomes. Although to vastly differing extents across organisations, economics are thus a day-to-day feature of civil society' functioning. Accordingly, economic indicators can provide some additional insights as to the organisational capacity civil society has achieved in East-Central Europe.

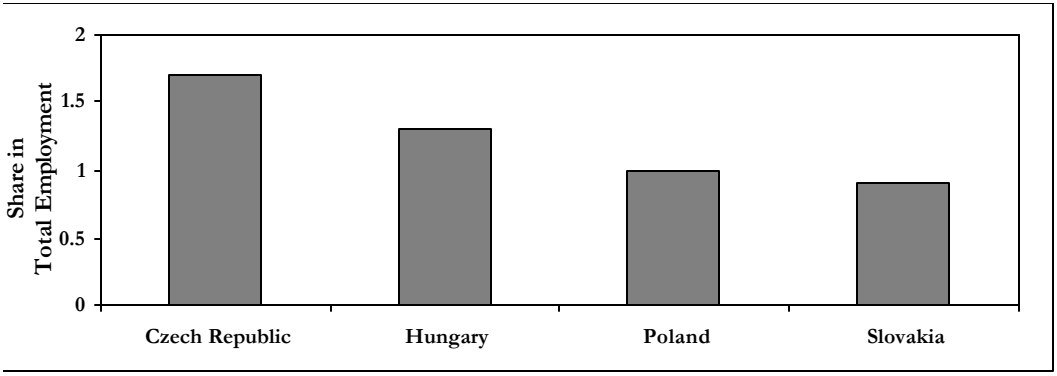
From this economic perspective, employment in civil society organisations is a first important indicator. Besides the help of volunteers, many civil society organisations also employ personnel on a part- or full-time basis. Paid staff assumes particular importance with regard to a number of organisational tasks that require specific skills, typically legal and accounting expertise. Moreover, organisations providing specific services in fields such as education, social services or health care depend on the employment of specialised and professional personnel, in addition to which voluntary workers can only play a complementary role. Employment, then, signals not only economic capacity but also the extent, to which civil society organisations have become professionalised and consolidated.

The following figure captures the economic capacity of civil societies in East-Central Europe in terms of employment. Paid staff is calculated in full-time equivalent employees and includes both full- and part-time personnel of civil society organisations. In addition, voluntary work has also been transformed into full-time equivalent employees in order to account for the economic significance of volunteerism discussed earlier. In aggregate, the figure illustrates, which share

[46] For this social differentiation of active participation in civil society, see for the Czech Republic, CVVM 1998, Fric et al. 2001; for Hungary, KSH 1995 and Angelusz & Tardos 1999; for Poland, Glinski & Palska 1996, CBOS 1998, Glinski 2000, CBOS 2000, Dabrowska & Wygnanski 2001; for Slovakia, Bútora & Fialová 1995, Bútora et al. 1997. The findings on the basis of these country sources find unanimous confirmation with the one international and comparative survey available; see ISSP 1998.

of the non-agricultural hired workforce is represented by employment and volunteers in civil society.

Figure 8 – Share of Civil Society in Total Employment in East-Central Europe 1995



Source: Salamon et al. 1999.
Note: Data for Poland refers to 1997, for Slovakia to 1996. Total non-agricultural employment.

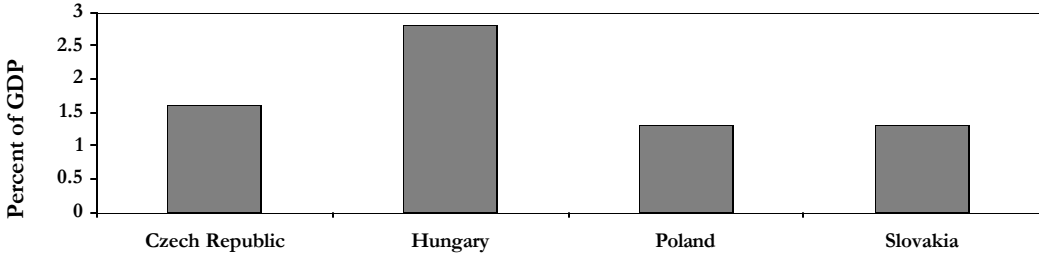
With values ranging from 0.9 percent in Slovakia to 1.7 percent in the Czech Republic, and Hungary and Poland occupying the middle ground, part- and full-time employment in civil society represents only a marginal share of the non-agricultural work force in East-Central Europe. Even the inclusion of volunteerism into this perspective increases the significance of civil society only slightly, by about 0.3 percent in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, while being of greater significance (0.9 percent) in the Czech Republic.[47] The weakness these levels of employment represent becomes particularly obvious in comparison with developed democracies in Western Europe and beyond, whose average value of employment in civil society reaches 6.1 percent of the total, with an additional 3.8 percent contributed through voluntary work.[48]

The relative insignificance of civil society in terms of the provision of employment is paralleled by very marginal figures along with a second economic indicator, namely the operating expenditures incurred by civil society organisations. Minimal as these may be for the overwhelming majority of organisations, their ongoing functioning incurs running costs, with office work and maintenance of an organisation's facilities creating the most frequent expenses. All those organisations that offer specific kinds of services face more

[47] The primary explanation for this greater significance in the Czech Republic is the inclusion of compensatory civilian service in the volunteer category.
[48] Salamon et al. 1999.

significant expenditures, be it exclusively for their own members as in the case of many interest groups or be it for a wider public, such as is the case of service-providers in the fields of education, health care and social services. Operating expenditures, thus, also signal the extent to which, civil society has developed the capacity to perform various of the functions outlined earlier. In aggregate and related to the GDP of the four countries, this indicator figures as follows for the civil societies of East-Central Europe.

Figure 9 – Operating Expenditures of Civil Society in East-Central Europe 199



Source: Salamon et al. 1999 and Les & Nalecz 2001: 12.
Note : Data for Poland refers to 1997, for Slovakia to 1996.

In terms of operating expenditures, civil societies also reveal an only marginal significance. In Hungary, civil society accounts for expenditures equalling 2.8 percent of the GDP of that country. Poland and Slovakia, in turn, reach only half that level, while civil society in the Czech Republic exhibits a somewhat higher 1.8 percent of GDP. These levels, again, represent merely a fraction of those common to civil societies in established democratic regimes.

On both accounts, civil societies in East-Central Europe, thus, face severe limitations to their economic capacity. So far, organisations within civil society in East-Central Europe dispose neither of the human nor the financial resources that would enable them to play a more significant role in society. This economic fragility, however, should not come as a surprise. After all, the very notion of civil society organisations as economic entities, as employers and producers, has reappeared in the countries of the region only recently, with all the legal, material and social obstacles that accompany such newness. This re-emergence has been further complicated by the processes of economic reform all four countries have, although in different ways, experienced since 1989. Not only have these put constraints on the availability of resources of various kinds but they have also

frequently diverted attention from creating more favourable conditions for the economic functioning of civil society, with privatisation, structural reform or unemployment taking priority. Inasmuch as civil society in the four countries has steadily gained in economic capacity, its further strengthening is likely to remain a function of the continued economic development in East-Central Europe.

A Source of Democratic Legitimacy?

From the macro-level perspective presented here, one can arrive at a very ambiguous picture of civil societies in East-Central Europe. Undeniably, the period since 1989 has seen a remarkable upsurge in civic and organisational activity across the four countries. Within this short period of time, civil societies have asserted themselves as integral component parts of the newly democratic regimes in the region. What contrasts with this rapid and positive development are a number of structural, social and economic characteristics that render doubtful the extent to which civil society in the four countries can make an active and strong contribution to democracy. This becomes obvious if one considers the consequences these characteristics have for civil society performing the various democratic functions outlined above.

The described structural legacy of transformed social organisations inherited after the state-socialist regime affects the democratic contribution of civil society in a number of ways. Most of these organisations emphasise their apolitical nature which, after all, allowed them to function before and continue to exist after 1989. Externally, this leads them to refrain from any autonomous political involvement, which is at the origin of the control of state and political power through civil society organisations. Rather than, in case of need, taking a critical stance towards a given political actor, such organisations are likely to concentrate on developing and maintaining smooth relationships with public authorities that are their traditional, and oftentimes, main source of funding. Internally, the postulate of being apolitical marginalises organisational procedures and, thus, diminishes the extent to which rank-and-file members can participate in the decision-making and functioning of the organisation, largely annulling the potential of those organisations to socialise their membership to democracy. Furthermore, the co-existence of transformed and newly established organisations introduces an important fault line to civil society, whose potential for polarisation must not be underestimated. This constellation not only frequently impedes co-operation among civil society organisations of different types, but it also reinforces one of the main political cleavages (ancien regime vs. former opposition) common to post-socialist democracies. This questions the socially integrative potential of civil society.

The fragile anchoring of civil societies in their social environment has similarly problematic consequences. In the first place, the low memberships reported

question the effectiveness of civil society as an agency for interest representation and mediation. After all, whether or not a given social interest finds an entry into political decision-making depends significantly on the extent to which this interest is defined, organised and articulated. Interest coverage, however, is generally very low in East-Central Europe, as membership figures demonstrate, thus limiting the contribution civil society can make to representing pluralist social interests.[49] Comparable restrictions arise concerning the democratic functions of social integration and political socialisation, both of which depend on higher levels of active participation in civil society in order to generate the integrative and political-cultural effects desired. Moreover, the observed social imbalances with regard to participation in civil society are even likely to threaten the integrity of social and political communities, if maintained in the long run.[50]

Finally, the described economic (in-)capacity of civil societies in East-Central Europe sheds critical light on the extent to which civic organisations can contribute to providing social goods and services. As observed, civil societies dispose of very limited human and financial resources. These are, moreover, very unevenly distributed among organisations. Transformed organisations typically inherited a strong resource base, while those established after 1989 have had to steadily accumulate the material and human resources required for their functioning. This lack of balance generally benefits activities in sports, recreation and culture over the provision of additional and frequently much needed services in health care, social services and education. As a result, the contribution of civil society to resolving more or less urgent social problems has so far remained subject to significant constraints.[51]

In limiting the capacity of civil society to perform its various democratic functions, however, the factors described have also inhibited its potential to generate democratic legitimacy. This assessment is not to fade out the significant differences between the four countries observed earlier. Nor is such an evaluation neglectful of the numerous and highly successful civic initiatives and organisations that have emerged and strengthened democracy all over East-Central Europe. It appears, however, that these exemplary cases are rather islands

[49] A case in point are trade unions, whose coverage of labour interests in East-Central Europe is as follows: Czech Republic – 18.3 percent, Hungary – 14.0 percent, Poland 9.0 percent, Slovakia – 29.6 percent of dependent employment, respectively (source: International Social Survey Programme).

[50] This potential is indicated by the significantly higher participation rates among ethnic Hungarians as compared to ethnic Slovaks in Slovakia; see Bútora et al. 1997.

[51] Education may serve as an example here. Across the four countries, civil society organisations maintain numerous establishments on all levels of education. Although gradually increasing, the aggregate contribution of these establishments is generally below 4 percent of all pupils/students (source: statistical yearbooks).

within a civic environment that has to date remained fledgling; somewhat less in the Czech Republic and in Hungary, significantly more in Poland and Slovakia. Such a view lends credence to all those who have so far remained sceptical as to the strength of civil society and its democratic potential in East-Central Europe.[52] On a more optimistic note, the perspective presented in this paper supports all those who claim that, after a stormy phase of re-emergence, civil societies in the four countries have entered a phase of consolidation. Underlying both views, however, is the sober recognition that the promise of civil society invoked by the democratic opposition of the 1970s and 1980 is, after a decade of democracy in the region, still very much a promise.

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[52] For the Hungarian case, this scepticism has been expressed by Miszlivetz 1997 and Lomax 1997.

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