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CIVIC SOCIETY

Croatia in 21 century

The term civic society refers to voluntary organizations and associations, unofficial networks of organized individuals involved in public activities. Civic society, unlike the traditional state is based on the principle of voluntariness, and is unlike private business by the fact that in the market of goods and ideas, the interests are not designed according to private interests but according to public welfare and the interests of the community. The idea of a civic society is that the state, which is not anymore only coercion, imposition of taxes and the guarantee of order, becomes not just the state of public administration but that in the interest of efficiency and democratic control it be substituted by complex structures of civic society. Civic society begins when hierarchy and bureaucracy cease to exist, when morality is integrated into the substance of law or, without trying to sound pathetic, when the logic of statism fails. Civic society embodies the whole range of voluntary organizations: social movements, church, trade unions, professional associations, humanitarian organizations, interest groups. The sphere of civic society will also include universities, municipal corporations, and associations of citizens as well as cooperative and economic associations.

1. The importance of civic society

The development of the civic society (the non-profit sector, non-governmental organizations, associations, foundations) increasingly becomes the framework for the solution of numerous problems in modern societies. It is true that civic, non-governmental initiatives provide for new forms of community development and the return to the forms of local democracy. They promote the subsidiarity principle as a form of just autonomy. Civic society has a mediating role, and is very important in promoting the process of social integration and cohesion in order to enable the development of partnerships and the rebuilding of local communities in a completely new way,

different from any previous one. In addition to market and public power there is “the third sector”, the social sphere outside the market logic and the logics of power which, before the reign of statism and industrialism, was a strong support of society. The idea is that the public be not a synonym for coercive and bureaucratic, or the voluntary a synonym for the privatized and commercialized. Statism and capitalism pushed back the domain of family life and community and freedom of association towards the non-material and, for the common good, the association, and the main reason not being a rational calculation of profit or law-abidingness.

The role of the state, as contemplated here, differs from the traditional one: in our view the state should not be a source of bureaucratic legislation but means for enabling easier coordination of all the elements of civic society. Such a state would instigate those forms of association that would aim at the achievement of interests which are not consumers’ or the interests of the citizen, the client.

Partnership between the state and the civic society strengthens and reinvigorates democracy, deters the risk of totalitarianism and charismatic experiments, rediscovers the benefits of decentralization and local communities, and encourages social entrepreneurship and self-employment.

The studies show that a developed civic sector is extremely important for the efficiency of the state administration, in particular at the local level. Development of civic society means self-organization of society bottom-up. It also means an additional mobilization of local resources.

2. Civic society in Croatia¹

In Croatia there is a relatively large number, a little bit more than 20.000, of organizations of civic society (associations, foundations and private institutions). The development of civic society during the past ten years was accompanied by a certain degree of political distrust and a restrictive legal and tax framework. In such a context the views in the civic society organizations developed around actions aimed at “against”. Therefore, average citizens make hardly any distinction between

¹ Based on the study prepared by Prof Gojko Bežovan.

the civic society and its activities and political parties. The civic society should achieve distinction by activities aimed at "for". The adopted Program of Cooperation agreed between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the non-profit, non-governmental sector in the Republic of Croatia, might yield new initiatives for the development of civic society and consequently better cooperation with the state administration. Some policy documents (environmental protection, employment, social welfare, anti-corruption campaign) adopted by the Croatian Parliament point out the importance of civic society, non-governmental organizations, thus affecting their development.

According to the results obtained, towns in Croatia finance primarily associations in the fields of sport, culture, social welfare (mostly Red Cross, Homeland War victims), fire brigades, war veterans and military volunteers. Other areas, in terms of the amount of grants awarded, are hardly worth mentioning. The impediments to the development of civic society include the very low level of citizen participation and the material hardship of the middle class. Citizens have no experience whatsoever in establishing self-organized institutions or in influencing decision-making. The state administration is very suspicious of civic initiatives. Civic society is inadequately represented in the media. Through the Croatian Association of Towns and Municipalities, it should be recommended that larger towns extend financial support to civic organizations. The towns should develop their own policy regarding the support of groups of associations and their partnership. The resources for the programs of the associations should be projected in the budgets.

The potential benefits from the development of civic society in Croatia and the potential cooperation with the state administration are very important in terms of: social capital, social entrepreneurship, development of social innovations, development of a combined model of social policy, development of new social infrastructure and the participation of citizens.

The system for granting support to associations from the State budget or from the budgets of units of self-government should be thoroughly examined. Non-profit organizations should be provided with better opportunities to participate in the program preparation processes, particularly those relating to local policies in various fields and participation in the decision-making process. Nongovernmental organizations should enter more intensively into agreements with local authorities for the provision of special services or the implementation of special programs. The system of social welfare should be decentralized and the units of local self-government entrusted

with more significant tasks. Thus they would be much more interested in cooperating with non-governmental organizations in the provision of public services (social entrepreneurship). The Law on Foundations and Endowed Institutions should be amended. In this context the foundations of local communities should be given appropriate consideration.

A great number of civic organizations function on a voluntary basis, and their programs are focused on advocating the values or interests of specific groups. The units of local self-government should be open to cooperation so that these organizations could enhance the solutions of problems in the community. Such cooperation would be linked closely to citizen participation in social and political processes.

Civic society in Croatia is still in its early stage of development. It is characterized by a very low level of civic awareness: there are only a small number of citizens in civic organizations, volunteering and giving for generally useful causes. Civic society has no tradition in Croatian society and in this context its legitimacy might be questionable. The cooperation between administration and civic organizations is at a very low level. Administration is very suspicious of any civic initiative. The current relationship is mostly confined to the provision of financial resources to the NGOs. The partnership between the public service and civil organizations remains a great unknown. Mixed – civic and public – governance bodies are still relatively rare. However, it is encouraging that the number of representatives of civic societies on various committees established for very relevant social issues is on the increase.

3. Perspective of the civic society in Croatia

Basic requirements regarding the protagonists of changes aimed at the promotion of the role of civic society:

- Avoid the risk to the development of civil society posed by excessive involvement of the state, the development of civic society in a top-down manner (related to this is the problem of the role of foreign organizations). It might be risky to launch a partnership program for the development of civic society on the basis of an unrealistic assumption of its being developed in Croatia.

- Any increasing benevolence and openness, particularly of the units of local self-government, towards civic organizations should be made use of, particularly in the decision-making process. In this context, special attention should be paid to the provision of public services at the local level. To this end it is necessary to build up the partnership between civic sector, state administration and companies.
- Civic society plays an important role in the development of responsible and efficient institutions, in this particular case, public administration, and has a very important role in anticorruption campaigns in such institutions.
- The legal framework for the development of civic society, particularly the policy framework, should be transparent. Bottom-up ideas for ways to influence decision-making should be put forward. A transparent system for the provision of financial support to civic organizations should be elaborated. Among central European countries in transition the number of the foundations established is the lowest in Croatia.
- Make use of the coming CARD program in order to learn from foreign experience and get some material and other technical assistance. Representatives of the state administration should be trained to be able to operate efficiently in this field.
- In Government programs for fields such as social welfare, environmental protection, education, employment and other, the need for partnerships between civic organizations and the state administration must always be pointed out.
- In developing civic culture as a pluralistic culture founded on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity should be encouraged. Encouraging the creation of a strong civic society is part of the strategy to rely on innovation and the independence of the individual. Thousands of associations build up and represent the interests of special groups and take over the burden of the task for public benefit (non-profit organizations, organizations for public benefit, NGOs). “Today a view prevails that modern governing requires new forms of cooperation between a political system and civic society, in other words a new division of labor between the state and other social protagonists by acting as a broker, facilitating, inspiring and monitoring. Devolution of power seems to a certain extent a functional necessity in current complex post-industrial society”.