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# Development of citizen participation in Central and Eastern Europe after the EU enlargement and economic crises

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## ABSTRACT

The main focus of this article is the role of organized civil society in facilitating citizen engagement in Central and East European new EU member states after the EU accession and the recent economic crises. Using international comparative methodologies and data this article analyses democratic processes in the new member states focussing on the changes in strengths and weaknesses of citizen engagement. It shows the ways in which the post-enlargement process, especially the economic crisis affected the ability of CEE citizens – both directly, and via civil society organisations and trade unions – to be active participants of the multilevel governance processes. It finds that one of the key remaining gaps of the democratization process remains the relative weakness of state–citizens relationship. The impact of the economic crisis on the CEE countries was significant, in particular in regard to financial viability of organised civil society. However, economic crisis also acted as an important mobilization factor, and in all countries under study, civic participation, enabled by civil society and trade unions increased. New initiatives – in particular those tackling corruption and party campaign finance, saw NGOs focussing their advocacy efforts towards the government as well as actively mobilizing and engaging citizens. Across the CEE region, we are seeing gradual social learning, internalization of new norms and emergence of new identities – active citizens engaged with (and if necessary in opposition to) the state – directly (public mobilization and protests) and via organized civil society.

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## 1. Introduction

With the recent tumultuous developments in Poland – following the 2015 victory of the Law and Justice Party and subsequent government interference into the rule of law leading to mass demonstration against and in favour of these reforms – Central and Eastern European politics are once again back on the front pages of worlds newspapers. The current events in Poland highlight that the transformation of the Central and Eastern Europe after 1989/1991 did not follow one successful trajectory. On the other hand, countries of Central Europe and of the Baltic region embarked on a (mostly) successful reform course, establishing stable and consolidated democracies and market economies, joining the NATO (in three waves 1999, 2004 and 2009) and the European Union (also in three waves 2004, 2007 and 2013). On the other hand, the post-Soviet countries in the Eastern Europe (and Central Asia), with the exception of the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), did not follow similar path—their transition to democracy and market economy was partial, inconsistent and often unstable, like in Ukraine. Today, none of these countries can be described as fully functioning consolidated democracy, and some are clearly authoritarian states led by strong and charismatic leaders (Linz, 1996; Merkel, 2009).

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The main focus of this article is the role of organized civil society in facilitating citizen engagement in Central and East European new EU member states after the EU accession and the recent economic crises. Using international comparative methodologies and data – CSO Sustainability Index (USAID) and European Value Survey (EVS) allows the author to analyse democratic processes in the new member states in terms of comparative and theoretically grounded criteria while at the same time contextualizing the overall domestic development and focus on the changes in strengths and weaknesses of citizen engagement.

In the first part conceptual framework will be established, addressing the challenges in conceptualizing and analysing citizen engagement and the impact of European Integration on domestic structures and review the EU impact in the CEE region. The second, analytical part, will first review the development of citizen engagement in the CEE region prior to the commencement of the economic crises, before addressing challenges the economic crises constituted for citizen involvement and providing comparative overview of the development over time from 2003 to 2014. The final part is dedicated to summary and conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Civil society is famously difficult to define— in theoretical literature the term has been used for centuries, but during this period it has undergone numerous conceptual and connotative changes (Keane, 1988; Gellner, 1991; Seligman, 1992; Alexander, 1997; Habermas, 2003). They have been widely discussed by specialists (Kohler-Koch, 2008) often leading to significant political discussions (Green and Leff, 1997). At the core of the global discussion about the character and the role of civil society in a democratic political system was the question of whether civil society actors at the macro-level should influence politics actively. The substance of the dispute is more complicated: it is about the definition of the relationship between the state and civil society, which in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe especially is considered to be essentially inconsistent: based on historical experience, CEE civil society is regarded as the opposition to state power (Arato and Cohen, 1990). According to Seligman, civil society has historically and repeatedly been the only ideological alternative to foreign hegemony in Central Europe (Seligman, 1992).

An extensive review of the literature reveals that on abstract level, ‘civil society’ is a term that delineates the area between the private sphere of interest and the state (Keane, 1988; Gellner, 1991; Seligman, 1992; Alexander, 1997; Habermas, 2003; Howard, 2003). The link between public sphere (PS) and civil society is established through active citizenship, defining the public sphere as an arena where active citizenship is realised through active civic and political engagement. Following Marc Morje Howard’s conception of civil society, PS rests on legal institutions and organising principles, that not only make up the essential core of any modern democratic system but are a key requirement for the notion of active citizenship and the concrete organisations that shape and define the particular character of the democratic system (Howard, 2003: 34–35).

Liebert and Trenz (2009:10–11) outline seven different conceptualisations (and research programmes) using civil society in the contemporary research on the (European) public sphere: (1) the historical approach, concentrating on traditions and path-dependency in European civil society; (2) the cultural approach, concentrating on values and attitudes and the ways these are conditioned by interaction with the media; (3) political-sociology approach, centring on the role of communication in the legitimisation of the European political order; (4) the communication approach, concentrating on the transnationalisation and functioning of the media landscape in Europe; (5) the social movement approach, highlighting transnationalisation of mobilisation and collective action; (6) the classical political science approach, focussing on performance of EU governance vis-à-vis the criteria of openness and transparency; and (7) the normative approach, focussing on normatively desirable institutional and procedural mechanisms of the future European constitutional order.

Within these approaches, three different forms and functions of civil society can be outlined. In representative democracy, civil society as a political community of the free and equal provides the basis for political mobilisation and channels of articulation of diverse interests; ensuring balanced representation. This notion highlights the opposition of the civil society towards the state, and the role of civil society in ensuring autonomy, as well as values of human rights and dignity. In participative democracy, rooted in the distinction of the various spheres of life, which are nexuses of civil society and transcend in establishing an autonomous realm for self-realisation, civil society provides effective channels of communication between the state and the citizens, and ensures inclusion of diverse (social and others) groups. In deliberative democracy, civil society is seen as an autonomous sphere-forming ‘fertile ground’ for the construction of self-interest and the exercise of self-governance, and civil society plays a crucial role as a facilitator of the deliberation process (Guasti, 2014; Liebert and Trenz, 2010).

In their article based on an expert online empirical survey Kohler-Koch and Quittkat (2009) introduce four conceptions, based on implicit functions civil society fulfils. First, the definition embedded in the representative function of civil society outlines the role of civil society as ‘giving voice’ to citizens. In this definition, civil society includes “trade unions, employers’ and producers’ organisations; non-governmental organisations representing general interests such as environment, human rights, social welfare, health and culture; professional associations and grass-root organisations”. The second definition centres on public discourse and sees civil society as a fluid mechanism, or a transmission belt of societal problems. The third concept revolves around that of self-constitution and self-mobilisation, fostering differentiation and self-governance, as well as balancing between the various spheres of life. Finally, the fourth definition, rooted in the concept of public well-being, casts civil society as the guardian of values such as solidarity, fostering social bonds and commitment to the community.

The first definition reflects the governance approach, and is rooted in the concept of representative democracy; the second definition is embedded in deliberative democracy and, especially in the works of Jürgen Habermas (1989, 1994), on public sphere. The third definition is based on the work of Arato and Cohen (1990), who see civil society as a dimension of the social world, as well as an opposition to state power, and highlight its crucial role in constituting society, and could be positioned at the intersection between the participative and deliberative models of democracy. The fourth definition is communitarian by nature and would be part of the participative democracy model.

Each of these definitions delineates the functions of civil society and its organising features. This has a significant impact on types of civil society organisations included and excluded in the definition (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2009, Kohler-Koch, 2010a, 2010b). The first definition highlights the representative feature of civil society – aggregation and articulation of interests and includes economic and social organizations and NGOs, whilst excluding advocacy groups. The participative and deliberative approaches collude to a large degree and use active involvement and entrenchment in civic life as an underlining principle of civil society. Here ‘value and rights based’ advocacy groups are included in the definition, but business interests, trade unions, and professional interest groups are excluded (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2009).

In this article, civil society is understood as quality and magnitude of citizen participation (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007), and organized civil society – represented by NGOs and trade unions – as constituting environment, in which individual citizens undergo process of socialisation acquiring civic skills, norms conducive to active citizenship, and becoming mobilized (Verba et al., 1995, Putnam, 2001). Organized civil society, also called voluntary associations or voluntary organizations, thus constitute opportunity structure enabling citizen participation<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. From theoretical concepts to empirical research on civil society

Despite its long tradition and topicality, the term ‘civil society’ is rather abstract and is used today mainly in theoretical and conceptual contexts, whereas empirical research related to civic society uses the practical and concrete concept of NGOs, which are an institutionalized form that represents a subset of civil society. The non-profit sector and its synonyms – civil sector or third sector – generally denote NGOs.<sup>2</sup> Some of the issues resulting from the current inaccurate use of the term ‘civil society; have been identified, for example by American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander, 1997).

The main difficulty in discussing NGOs is the increasing vagueness and inclusivity of its usage that has made it in both a black box and catch-all, and there is a further difficulty in distinguishing NGOs from other similar kinds of associations. NGOs vary in their organizational forms; degree of accountability to their members; their forms of action (here the range is almost infinite, from almost invisible service provision for disadvantaged groups to highly visible advocacy or direct forms of protest); origin, ranging from informal groups of friends to governmental, transnational, or even corporate agencies (Rakušanová, 2007); and motivation or goals. Some NGOs can be a part of corporate responsibility efforts, some ensure more effective communication of company policies, and yet others serve as a smoke screen for controversial action.

An example of the latter is Czech NGO *South Bohemian Daddies*, founded by male employees of the nuclear power plant Temelin with the encouragement and support of the company's management, in order to serve as a nuclear energy advocacy group, and a counter-weight to the established anti-nuclear NGO *South Bohemian Mothers*. The main claim of *South Bohemian Daddies* is that ‘fathers understand energy issues best’ and that nuclear energy is a form of ‘green energy’. This example, beyond its almost comical nature, points to yet another critical issue defining NGOs as an organizational form of civil society: very often in the civil society literature, one encounters definitions that only include organizations outside the sphere of the state, family and business which actions and goals are perceived as normatively beneficial (Rakušanová, 2007).

Hence one of the major challenges in the literature dedicated to civil society, and citizen participation is the link between sophisticated theoretical framework highlighted above and systematic comparative empirical research. This is an inherent and often criticized issue (Alexander, 1997; Rakušanová, 2007), leading to somewhat problematic and fragmentary outcomes in comparing civil society and citizen participation over time and across different countries (Alexander, 1997; Rakušanová 2007).

An attempt at resolving this conundrum is the “sustainability index” published annually by the *United States Agency for International Development*. It evaluates seven characteristics that are recognized as crucial factors determining the sustainability of civil society organizations. They include: (1) financial sustainability, (2) organizational capacity, (3) public image, (4) advocacy, (5) infrastructure, (6) legal environment and (7) provision of services (Ehmann, 2006).<sup>3</sup> The advantage and rationale for using the USAID data in this article is the ability to systematically analyse changes over time and across various countries of the CEE region. Its limitations are mainly in scope – it only focuses on NGO sector and does not consider trade unions, and other forms of participation.

<sup>1</sup> Political opportunity structures in respect to non-electoral participation are discussed by Vrábliková (2014).

<sup>2</sup> The Italian political scientist Amitai Etzioni introduced the notion of the third sector, that is, the sector between the state and economic spheres, in the 1970s to refer to a set of private organizations providing public services sponsored by the state (Etzioni, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Each indicator is qualitatively evaluated by employees and experts of USAID and measured on a seven-point scale, where 1 indicates a very developed civil society and 7 an under-developed civil society (Ehmann, 2006).

## 2.2. CEE civil society

The literature on civil society in Central and Eastern Europe hints towards inherent weaknesses in terms of low and further weakening organisational membership, mobilization power, growing individualism and apathy of CEE citizens, and lack of institutional and interpersonal trust (Howard, 2003; Raiser, 2001; Rose, 2001; Rose-Ackerman, 2001; Petrova and Tarrow, 2007). For example, Howard (2003: 160) shows that the average organisational membership (per person) in post-socialist countries is 0.91, compared to the average of 1.82 for post-authoritarian societies and 2.39 for older democracies; and Rose (2001:16); Rose et al. (1998:60) indicates that majority of Russians do not belong to any voluntary organisations – and participation is limited to religious organisations and trade unions.

However, Ekiert and Foa in their analysis of civil society and civic behaviour show that while there are striking differences across the CEE region – in terms of quality of public space, density of organisations and behaviour of civil society actors – the findings of previous studies (Howard, 2003; Raiser, 2001; Rose, 2001) were ‘simplistic generalisations’ and an outcome of narrow focus on single dimension of civic life – organisational density, and limited use of data sources – surveys and public opinion surveys; and that the CEE is transforming – older organisations might be disappearing, but new organisational forms and voluntary organisations appear (Ekiert and Foa, 2011:37; Rakušanová 2007).

Although the authors cited above might not agree on the quality of civil society in the CEE and the magnitude of civic participation, there is a general agreement about the importance of external actors and the transformative power of the EU (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007).

## 2.3. The European Union and CEE civil society

In general, the EU conditionality<sup>4</sup> facilitated major changes in governance and reform capacity, significantly influenced policy choices, as well as performance of institutions (Pridham, 2008; Vachudova, 2014). Within the accession process, the EU was successful in generating positive conditional incentives and diffusing its institutional models as well as policies to CEE countries (Grabbe, 2003; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005; Vachudova, 2005). The ways in which the Europeanization acted as an opportunity structure for civil society in CEE region can be summarized using Cowles and Caporaso's five areas of Europeanisation: policy, structure, norms, state–society relationships, and constitutional politics (2001).

In terms of policy – Europe has the capacity to act as a domestic political resource for civil society. In structural terms, the EU is a source of major structural changes in its member states – decentralisation and EU regional funds represent an important resource for civil society. As regards norms, the changes in conceptions of national identity and national citizenship represent a shift in value orientation among the EU citizenry. In terms of state–society relations – important changes in the relationship between state, its institutions and societal actors can be seen, such as the growing interaction between the state and organized civil society in legislation and implementation. As for constitutional design, the constitutionalisation process at the European level has important consequences for the constitutional system of the member states. This is only indirectly relevant to civil society, but the discussions on the impact of EU integration on state sovereignty as discussed by the German and Czech Constitutional Courts (Guasti, 2014), acted as a mobilization opportunity for the opponents of deepening integration across the CEE.

The EU constrained the ability of dominant political actors, such as governments, to control the public sphere, by creating new opportunities for societal actors such as civil society. Three main aspects can be outlined: (1) institutional—societal consultation of EU legislation reinvigorated somewhat faltering social dialogues across the CEE region (Mansfeldova, 2015); (2) ideational—EU provides civil society actors with arguments for changes in legislation; and (3.) financial—EU structural and regional funds encourage participation of non-state actors.

The EU adaptation pressure (Börzel and Risse, 2000) also resulted in emergence of new norms, ideas and collective understandings. The main factors facilitating change are norm entrepreneurs and cooperative informal institutions. This led to socialization and social learning, and the result is norm internalization and development of new identities (Börzel and Risse, 2000). In this respect, CEE civil society organisations are both – an important norm entrepreneur and an arena for cooperative informal institution where civic skills are learnt and active citizenship acquired (Verba et al., 1995, Putnam, 2001).

However, the potential of the EU to exert influence on processes of domestic change varied in post-communist Eastern Europe. Epstein and Sedelmeier maintain that accession improved the general institutional infrastructure of CEE countries and thus led to increase in legislative capacity. The accession process led to socialization via naming and shaming of countries lagging behind, and praising of positive examples. As a result, the best compliance rates can be found among the laggards such as Slovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania (invited to join the EU in Helsinki in 1999). On contrary, the leaders were able to resist to (the comparatively lower) EU adaptation pressure (Epstein and Sedelmeier, 2013).

Ugur (2013) in assessing the governance and reforms in the CEE countries after accession less positively - his analysis finds that EU conditionality did not have statistically significant effect on reform efforts and governance during the EU membership and that hints towards backsliding can be detected across the region (2013: 48; Gati, 2007; Rupnik, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Conditionality is a mechanism used by international institutions to ensure compliance and directing policies in exchange for rewards, and while the effect of conditionality as a tool are largely disproportioned around the world, Central and Eastern Europe is often highlighted as success story of conditionality (Epstein and Sedelmeier 2008).

Ugur's analysis does not claim that EU conditionality did not matter, but rather that EU accession process was a window of opportunity for domestic reform forces to alter the existing path (2013). Thus both pre-existent conditions and domestic actor constellations are the key factors affecting compliance. The costs of reforms are the main explanation for resistance to conditionality, non-compliance, and non-implementation of the conditionality induced changes.

After the enlargement, the loss of EU leverage is perceived as the main contributing factor to the post-accession crises (Guasti, 2014). The CEE post-accession picture is further complicated by the onset of global economic crisis. Economic crisis significantly affected most CEE countries, further reinforcing the diversity within the region (Dutkiewicz and Gorzelak, 2013), and leading some authors to claim deconsolidation of the CEE political order (Agh, 2010). This pessimistic account is based on persistence and strengthening of several important weaknesses of CEE democracies in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and efficacy (Rupnik, 2007; Agh, 2010). Given these innate and mutually reinforcing weaknesses (Hacek et al., 2013), the economic crisis can be perceived as a stress test for the quality of CEE democracy and the degree of democratic consolidation. In this period, domestic actors stand in focal point and the impact of external factors such as the EU is limited.

In terms of civil society and citizen engagement in Central and Eastern Europe, this leads to the expectation that the post-enlargement processes, coupled with the economic crisis, would cause their weakening. The factors contributing to this negative change would be the limited role of external actors and precarious domestic state-society relations – as illustrated by the deterioration of the group based action across CEE (Loveless, 2013; Merkel and Krause, 2015; Mansfeldova, 2015).

In the subsequent analysis, we will focus on the changing role of civil society in CEE after the EU accession and the role of the economic crisis. In order to avoid the methodological bias pointed out by Ekiert and Foa (2011), we will use qualitative data and examine the role of organised civil society in citizen engagement in Central and Eastern Europe.

### 3. The impact of EU accession: comparative examination of citizen engagement in Central and Eastern Europe

The following section evaluates the initial impact of EU accession on citizen engagement in NGOs and trade unions in Central and Eastern Europe. USAID *NGO Sustainability index* data for the period from 1998 to 2005 is analysed. For the trade unions, data from EurWork and European Values Survey are used. A comparative perspective is adopted to assess the overall dynamics – the strengths and the weaknesses of civic engagement in organised civil society (NGOs, trade unions) in four CEE countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia).

In the long term, the main weakness of the non-profit sector in CEE is financial sustainability. Accession to the European Union has further widened the gap between organisations capable of adapting their operational environment to fundamental change brought about by the EU accession, and those unable to cope. One aspect that has proven to be critical is the disappearance of foreign donors, who consider democracy in Central Europe as fully consolidated and able to cope without further financial assistance. Contrary to this perception, the picture painted by the sustainability index is a lot less optimistic.

After accession, the largest financial donors, such as USAID, Open Society Institute and US foundations in general, have, mostly, closed their representations in CEE countries and moved further east, that is, to the former CIS. An important exception is the *Trust for Civil Society* jointly established by *Atlantic Philanthropies*, *Charles Stewart Mott Foundation*, *Ford Foundation*, *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, *Open Society Institute* and *Rockefeller Brother Fund* to foster the continuation of targeted programs until 2010. This proves to be crucial, both in respect to their future operation, but also in view of the fact that the model for funding from the EU mostly assumes additionally financing by own resources<sup>5</sup>

Due to international pressure by departing donors, the EU established a fund in 2005 for “Action in support of civil society in new EU member states.” (European Commission, 2006)<sup>6</sup> Two million Euros was put into this fund in its first year. The main objective of the initiative was to support dialogue and cooperation between the European Union and civil society in new member states in the following areas: free elections, separation of powers, rule of law, the creation and/or promotion of a prison system respectful of human dignity, police, transparency, media pluralism and fighting corruption. In 2008 this was transformed into *Civil Society Facility*, with the program areas largely remaining unchanged (European Commission, 2016).

It is evident from the listed programme areas that the programme was tailored for watchdog organisations focussing on the quality of democracy and basic human rights. It is precisely the organizations in these areas that were most threatened by the departure of donors, as they generally reject state and business funding. The main organising principle here is participative democracy and participation of citizens and improvement of state-society dialogue and relations are being fostered in new member states, accession countries and in Turkey.

With regard to other sources of EU funding available for NGOs in CEE countries (EU structural funds and national operational programmes), these tend to be problematic. In the USAID national evaluations, civil society organisations in Poland, Hungary, Lithuania and Latvia indicated problems in accessing these EU funds. Reports outline that the EU and national states fail to provide training on how to apply for and access EU resources, the application process is excessively long, bureaucratic, and not sufficiently transparent (Ehmann, 2006; Rakušanová, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> EU co-finances projects and does not fully cover all costs; moreover funds are often provided retrospectively within the framework of allocated projects, meaning the lack of organized civil society's own and independent funding undermines the involvement in the EU programmes.

<sup>6</sup> Within the framework of this fund, a total of 3 million Euro were allocated to 32 different projects from 10 countries in 2006 (Herman in Ehmann, 2006: 35).



Directly linked to financial sustainability is organisational capacity. Civil society organizations struggle with personnel politics; it is difficult to get and retain qualified personnel. The funding schemes of current projects often only allow limited-period work contracts, resulting in a high turnover of employees. State-based funding for service provision is often provided on annual bases and suffers from serious delays – leading to serious setbacks in cash-flow of organisations, which are unable to pay their staff.

Overall, CEE organized civil society in the initial post accession period grappled with a lack of modern technology enabling effective communication among and with members, volunteers and citizens. In this respect it is of serious concern that most of the organizations seem to be content with the poor dynamics of their membership base development and the stagnating number of volunteers. Study of the Czech Republic points to important exceptions among medium and large scale civil society organizations, which have managed to end this trend and in some cases reverse it – expanding their membership and volunteer bases that is, Czech voluntary fire-fighters (Rakušanová, 2007).

Membership base communication, as well as communication with the broader public, is the third lowest ranking indicator of the USAID index. In 2005, Hungary had the worst rating for this aspect while Poland had the best. The evaluation in Hungary's case was negatively influenced by media attention focussing on the often non-transparent links between civil society organizations and politics.

In respect to public image, a weakness of civil society is its failure to establish links with the media, particularly at a national level. Both NGOs and trade unions fail to acquire space for the positive public presentation of their activities. Throughout Central Europe, national media tend mostly refer to them in connection with scandals or corruption. However, the failure to establish a productive relationship with the media cannot be fully ascribed to NGOs and trade unions themselves, but points to a large degree of selectiveness on the part of the media. In the Czech Republic, for example, the media justifies the lack of coverage vis-à-vis civil society as their attempt to avoid hidden advertisement for donors (Rakušanová, 2007).

Although they are largely missing from the national press, NGOs and trade unions and their activities constitute an integral part of regional and local press coverage. Campaigns targeting children and development aid constitute an important exception to the lack of media attention. These projects tend to emphasize their public visibility and succeed in attracting a rather high level of publicity, in many cases thanks to the link between charity projects and celebrities. Advertisement and public fundraising activities are crucial in establishing short term as well as long term donations. In Slovakia and Hungary advertisement is necessary to persuade citizens to allocate their tax allowances to individual organizations.

Establishment of so-called company foundations, for example, Siemens, Vodafone, O2, Microsoft, and Hewlett Packard, contributed positively to raising profile of citizen engagement. Company foundations are an integral part of firms' communications with the public. In addition to funding their own activities and engaging its employees in volunteering – often along the lines of company's core business – such as communication for Vodafone and O2 – this new type of organizations on the nexus between civil society and the market, contributes to raising public awareness to participation and volunteering, as well as actively engaging in these activities.

Advocacy is generally rather weak in the CEE countries due to lack of linkages between civil society and state institutions. As an exception and positive example, could be cited campaigns against issues such as domestic violence, which were able to bring together civil society organization and state institutions. In the Czech Republic this campaign resulted in the successful passing of Law against Domestic Violence, which was drafted by the Alliance against Domestic Violence. This was the first time when civil society succeeded in establishing vital alliances both between different CSOs, and between civil society and individual members of the parliament (Rakušanová, 2007). The role of organized civil society in this process was to mobilize public awareness of and support to the issue, as well as actively engage with political institutions in preparing the law.

In Poland, the success of civil society engagement can be illustrated by the Law on publicly beneficial activities and volunteer work (2003). This law enables civil society organizations to comment on draft legislation and to be part of government committees. While succeeding at national level, the implementation of this law tends to be inadequate at regional and local levels. Polish civil society organizations report problems in attempting to engage in constructive dialogue with regional political representatives (Rakušanová, 2007).

As regards regional political representation, EU funds represent an important opportunity for fostering cooperation between civil society and the political sphere. More and more local political representatives realise that the expertise of civil society organizations in areas such as environmental protection is indispensable (Dimitrova and Buzogány, 2014).

Infrastructure is among the better rated aspects of the *USAID Sustainability Index* and has an improving tendency. In the long term, Poland has the best rating for infrastructure. The positive evaluation in Poland can be attributed to umbrella organizations that administer the information database of non-profit organisations. Furthermore, Polish civil society organizations successfully form sectoral coalitions and umbrella organisations at regional, national and even European level. Of the monitored countries, Polish civil society was the only one with its own representation in Brussels before EU accession. Once every three years a Forum of Non-Profit Organisations is also organised. This facilitates better awareness, the exchange of experiences and the establishment of cooperation within Polish civil society.

Conversely, the relatively poor rating for infrastructure in the Czech Republic is primarily caused by the lack of such nationwide networks, an important exception being the *Information Centre for Non-Profit Organisations*, which for a long time has been improving awareness and cooperation both within organized civil society and in terms of civil society's communication with the public. Still, there is room for further improvement on the part of civil society itself and individual civil society organizations, but also on the part of the state. This claim is supported by an evaluation of the development of the legal environment outlined below (Ehmann, 2006).

The legal environment is the second-based rated factor, with a significant level of variation among countries. While in the Czech Republic the scholars continue to judge legal environment very critically – there is no clear legal definition of a civil society organisation; the registration process is relatively long, and others. Hungary has the best rating in this aspect. In 2006 Hungary amended the law on free access to information, and passed a new law on volunteer work. This law facilitated volunteer activity by allowing non-profit organisations to pay the costs of volunteers without being taxed for it (Ehmann, 2006).

On average, the best rated factor across all CEE countries is the provision of services. In the 2005 evaluation, the Czech Republic ranked the best, while Hungary was the weakest. Again significant variation occurs among the CEE countries (Ehmann, 2006). CEE civil society organizations provide a wide range of services in areas such as healthcare, social welfare, education, environmental protection, youth work, drug prevention, and so on. CSOs are often the only provider of such services, for example, in the Czech Republic hospices are run solely by civil society organisations and the civil society also dominates in the provision of drug rehabilitation and HIV/AIDS prevention (Rakušanová, 2007).

A crucial problem in this area is the financing of service provision. Here, civil society organizations are fully dependent on the state, which defines the agenda and allocates resources. In the past critical disagreements occurred between state agencies and civil society organisations in terms of agenda setting. For example, in the case of caring for people with long-term illnesses, the state prefers allocation of resources for institutional care while civil society advocates individual home care.

Even in situations, when there is an agreement between state and CSOs the funding is provided on grant-basis and annually. This negatively affects the ability of civil society organisations to provide high-quality services on a continuous long-term basis. Due to budgetary restrictions and delays, CSO in all the countries under study have faced this issue. State based EU funding shows similar issues and weakens the ability of civil society organisations to obtain adequate mid- and long-term funds for their activities. As a result, the existing environment hinders CSOs ability to generate financial reserves necessary for coping with the funding model used by EU programmes—most costs are reimbursed ex-post rather than prior to funded activity and most programmes expect certain degree of co-financing.

In order to summarize, Fig. 1 sums up strengths and weaknesses of CEE's NGOs and trade unions after EU accession. The key feature is funding – grant-based annual funding negatively affects the ability of civil society organisations to provide high-quality services on a continuous long-term basis. In the existing environment, the bureaucratic character of national based EU (structural) funding leads to widening gap between increasingly professionalized NGOs often located in CEE capital cities, which able to continuously draw EU funding, but also tend to be increasingly detached from membership base, and smaller NGOs operating on voluntary basis outside state capitals, with limited won resources and restricted access to external funding.

| factor                   | weakness      | change | Change   |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------|--|
| financial sustainability | main weakness | ---    | US donors withdrew<br>strong reliance on state funding for service provision<br>difficult access to EU structural funding  |
| organizational capacity  | problematic   | --     | low level of social recognition<br>lack of modern technology enabling effective communication between and with members, volunteers and citizens  |
| public image, advocacy   | Weak          | +      | failure to establish links with the national media;<br>improvement in visibility on local level<br>emergence of corporate foundations<br>uneven improvement in relation to advertisement for tax deductions<br>advocacy capacity improving (domestic violence, corruption)   |
| infrastructure           | very strong   | +++    | improving, strong in Poland due to existence of umbrella organisations on regional and sectoral level, but weak in the Czech republic, where strong discrepancy exists between Prague and the rest of the country  |
| legal environment        | strong        | ++     | improving, but strongly varies across the CEE region   |
| provision of services    | very strong   | +++    | variation across the CEE region;<br>provision of a wide range of services in areas such as healthcare, social welfare, education, environmental protection, youth work, drug prevention, and others.<br>strong dependence on state funding - state defines the agenda, and critical disagreements can occur between state agencies and civil society organisations on the importance of activities |

**Fig. 1.** Strengths and weaknesses of CEE's NGOs and trade unions after EU accession.

Source: USAID, own analysis, evaluation on the scale of --- main weakness to +++ main strengths.

In terms of trade unions, three main characteristics of CEE industrial relations can be observed: CEE trade unions tend to be smaller, weaker, more decentralised and the degree of unionisation smaller than in Western and Southern Europe<sup>7</sup>; in general the CEE collective bargaining structure is weak – mostly focused on company level; statutory worker representation bodies such as worker councils are rare in CEE, and coverage by collective agreements is mostly located at company level (Henning, 2015: 54).

One of the main problems of CEE trade unions is fragmentation – small and weak trade unions are divided among sectoral and territorial lines. The lack of national level confederation is evident especially in Poland and in Hungary (but also in Bulgaria and Romania), whilst both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have sectoral and general confederations on national level. Fragmentation of trade unions is further augmented by different political orientation of trade unions – trade union plurality exist in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania with parallel structures of Social Democratic and Christian democratic trade unions in place, but missing in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where the trade union confederations have long standing and strong ties to social democrats.

In general, trade unions in CEE are politically and financially weak. The prevailing bottom-up organisation model hinders sectoral cooperation. European Trade Union Confederation fostered stronger sectoral approach, but the results are so far limited (Henning, 2015; Mansfeldova, 2015). Trade unions are mostly present in state-owned or formerly state-owned companies. The emergence of trade unions in private enterprises has been limited; trade unions are not present in small and medium size enterprises, which in effect are not covered by collective agreements.<sup>8</sup>

These factors weaken the collective bargaining power of trade unions on national level. Furthermore sectoral and national level employer's associations are also limited in CEE countries, thus both sides of the social dialogue remain rather weak. The state thus remains the key actor in industrial relations, providing both institutional framework and statutory minimal wages. The participation of social partners in policy- and decision-making is limited. After the EU accession, the implementation of EU directives on information and consultation provided framework for an increased establishment of workers councils (Poland), it also safeguarded the monitoring functions of workers councils under the new labour law, which removed this right from company trade unions (Hungary) and led to increased cooperation between worker councils and company trade unions (Slovakia) (Fulton, 2014).

To sum up, in the advent of the financial crisis, the NGOs and trade unions as structures for citizen engagement were generally consolidated across the CEE region. The strengths of the NGOs in the CEE region were legal environment and service provision. Main weaknesses for both NGOs and trade unions were financial viability and relation to the state/governance. Over time, NGO and trade union financial viability did not change significantly, but countries such as Poland, Hungary, Estonia and Slovenia benefited from large scale EU structural funding, partially involving funding for NGOs and trade unions. On the contrary, due to delays in government distribution of EU funding the situation in the Czech Republic and Latvia worsened. Especially in Latvia, this was amplified by growing inflation. Similarly, in terms of service provision, the delays in central government payment (especially in Hungary, Slovakia and Poland) affected NGOs. In Poland, this has been partially mitigated by the funding from regional governments and municipalities.

The onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 significantly affected most CEE countries (Dutkiewicz and Gorzelak, 2013). Following the IMF, the economic crisis is defined here as economic contraction and labour market impact, leading to a drop in private consumption, gross capita formation and subsequent cuts in government expenditures (Verick and Islam, 2010: 49). The impact of the global economic crisis and the subsequent Euro crisis varied in the CEE, there was virtually no negative impact in terms of GDP or labour market indicators in Poland; medium economic contraction and medium labour market impact in the Czech Republic; medium economic contraction and severe labour market impact in Slovakia; severe economic contraction and medium labour market impact in Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary, whilst the Baltic countries were hit the hardest – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania experienced both severe economic contraction and severe labour market impact (Verick and Islam, 2010: 29).

Based on the USAID Sustainability Index CEE reports (USAID CSO sustainability Index Reports 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012) the following part summarises the effects of the economic crisis on citizen engagement in the CEE region. Using data from EurWORK, the situation of trade unions and citizen involvement in trade union led actions is analysed.

Given the financial vulnerability of CEE organized civil society, especially the relative dependence on state finance (service provision) and under-developed domestic donor landscape, the main challenges during the financial crisis were fears about the future economy (Ehmann, 2009). And while some governments across the CEE region continued efforts to provide NGO funding (such as the Estonian national *Foundation for Civil Society* established in 2008) to facilitate service provision, in the light of the looming crisis and potentially shrinking state finances, the relative dependence of CEE CSOs on state funding constituted a double edge sword.

In 2008 the struggle was evident in CSOs attempting to achieve financial sustainability beyond ad hoc project funding in order to stabilize and retain staff. As the funding provided by the traditional international donors continued to shrink, the

<sup>7</sup> According to the EurWORK September 2014 data, trade union density ranges between 11% in Hungary, 12% in Poland, and 16% in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as compared to the EU average of 23%. Trade union density is higher in Bulgaria 18% and significantly higher in Romania 40% (Eurofound, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> According to the EurWORK September 2014 data, collective bargaining coverage ranges between 20% in Poland, 23% in Hungary, and 34% in the Czech Republic and 35% in Slovakia, as compared to the EU average of 62%. Collective bargaining coverage is higher in Bulgaria 33% and in Romania 35–40% (Eurofound, 2015).



reliance on state and EU structural funds grew. This trend peaked in 2010, however, the access to EU funding was bureaucratically challenging for smaller regional organisations, where know-how has not yet been established (USAID, 2010).

The challenging efforts to obtain EU funding – from EU structural funds and EU operational programs was further complicated by cases of corruption and clientelism (Czech Republic, Poland, Romania). This further stretched the limited resources and undermined viability of smaller organisations. In order to at least partially mitigate this situation, Czech *Via Foundation*, administering *T-Mobile Fund* introduced two-stage grant competition, and co-finance model allowing co-finance to consist of invested stuff and volunteer time.

Tax legislation allowing taxpayers to dedicate part of their income tax to NGOs exists in many CEE countries (Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, and Romania) however its results are at best mixed – the measure deepens the gap between professionalized NGOs with wider appeal and media skills, while smaller NGOs in less visible fields and/or less affluent regions struggle to secure this form of funding. Furthermore, NGOs find themselves in a devils circle – need to hire and retain professional staff to generate and administer resources, need to generate resources to retain professional staff. The contraction of CEE economies during the economic crisis further affected the ability of CSOs to draw tax deductions.

The public image of NGOs, while generally positive, is sensitive to potential scandals reported by the media and lack of positive media coverage. Similarly, the public trust and support for trade unions was generally low in the CEE region prior to the economic crisis. The onset of the economic crisis and the active engagement of the trade unions against government reforms and austerity measures (the Czech Republic, Hungary) strengthened the public image of trade unions and trust of the public grew.<sup>9</sup> In the same period the trust to trade unions in Slovakia and Poland deteriorated, although they were also actively engaged in anti-austerity activities. In all CEE countries, the trust to trade unions is higher than trust to political parties or the government (the exception is trust to government in Slovakia, which was higher than trust to trade unions). The growing trust to the trade unions continued throughout the crisis, but was also accompanied by rise in public distrust. This was especially the case in all CEE countries (Henning, 2015:67–68) – indicating growing polarization in state-civil society relations across the CEE region.

In terms of labour relations, the economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures included: limiting workers' rights, deregulation of working time (Czech Republic and Poland), the extension of fixed-term contracts and temporary agency work (Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia), deregulation of redundancy payments and general weakening of employment protection (Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland), decentralization and weakening of trade union rights (Slovakia) and general attack on the system of social dialogue (Hungary) and attempts to reduce minimal wage (Slovenia), public sector pay-freezes (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), and welfare benefits cuts (Poland, Slovakia and Romania). The changes to labour legislation and labour market regulation were most significant in Hungary (Henning, 2015; Toth et al., 2012).

This resulted in unprecedented public protests across the CEE region. In October 2010 trade unions organized major protests in Slovak capital Bratislava forcing Slovak government to resign in 2011. In April 2011, Hungarian and European trade unions organized large scale demonstrations against austerity measures and Euro-Plus pact in Budapest. In November 2011 the Czech trade unions together with a number of NGOs organized large scale protests in Prague against pension and health reforms leading further undermining the weak government and contributing to its fall. In September 2013, three main Polish trade unions overcame their animosity and organized joint demonstration against pension reform and deregulation of working time gathering more than 200.000 citizens in Warsaw (Henning, 2015: 65–66). In most CEE countries, these were the largest anti-government protests since the fall of communism.

For NGOs, the economic crisis negatively influenced the already fragile financial viability, as both public funding related to service provision and private donation shrank. The overall funding available for NGOs decreased in particular in Hungary, Lithuania and Bulgaria. In the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania, NGOs faced significant difficulties in recovering service related costs from the governments. Across the CEE region, competition among service providing NGOs grew significantly, with new private companies also entering into the competition for scarce resources with NGOs. The tax free donations dramatically decreased especially in countries heavily hit by the crisis such as Hungary. Corporate funding also decreased, especially in the Czech Republic.

In order to reverse this trend, in 2010 Lithuanian NGOs initiated sectoral institutionalization of service provision. In 2012 the Polish and Slovakian CSOs also strengthened their working relations with government agencies in particular in areas where EU funding was available. This cooperation was fostered in particular in countries, where institutional setup and frameworks such as *NGO Council* existed and facilitated mutual cooperation (Slovakia, Czech Republic).

In countries attracting significant EU structural funding, the economic crisis was a blessing in disguise – it severed the dependence on state funding and led NGOs to look for new and creative ways to engage with the public, search for new funding opportunities. In terms of personnel, it also brought new type of staff – people leaving private sector due to cutting of costs and redundancies and seeking employment beyond the private/commercial sector, and new types of skills into the NGO sector. Especially NGOs in Slovakia, while experiencing setbacks in government funding, managed to attract significant private donations.

<sup>9</sup> According to the European Value Study data between 1999 and 2008 the trust to trade unions (on a four point scale where 1 is great trust and 4 is no trust at all) grew in the Czech Republic from 3.02 to 2.92, from 3.09 to 2.99 in Hungary and decreased from 2.78 to 2.86 in Poland and from 2.69 to 2.75 in Slovakia. Average trust to trade unions in computerized order management system (OMS) is 2.67 in 2008 (Henning, 2015:67).

From 2009/2010 onwards CEE civil society organisations increasingly engaged with social media to enhance their public exposure, and improve communication with citizens. New forms of ad hoc donations via mobile phones (so called donor SMS – DMS) were used – in particular in the Czech Republic – which raised close to one million Euro in DMS donations alone in 2012 (USAID, 2013). Also growing were donor web portals – especially in Slovakia from 2009 to 2010. Between 2011 and 2012 online fundraising platforms were developed in Latvia, Lithuania and the Czech Republic (Henning, 2015).

From 2011 onwards the CSOs in the CEE region also enhanced efforts to strengthen relationships with the corporate sector – cultivating and reinforcing corporate giving. This is especially evident in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In the Czech Republic the *Via Foundation* focuses on fostering donor culture providing expertise and assistance to companies and corporations to establish corporate responsibility structures. In 2013 *Via Foundation* assisted T-Mobile Czech Republic in distributing 100.000 Euro to NGOs via small-scale grants by developing application and evaluation criteria together with academics and CSO experts. Based on feedback provided by experts and NGOs, two-stage application process and non-monetary co-financing was introduced to level the competition. This procedure set an important positive example for other corporate donor activities, for which *Via Foundation* is a key hub and advisory body.

From 2012 the negative effects of the crisis started to reverse, in particular in the Czech Republic and Lithuania, where the economy started to show signs of recovery, unlike in Latvia, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, where the effects of the on-going global financial crisis continue to undermine CSO financial viability. The most important regional outlier is Hungary, where the CSO sustainability continues to decline – result of weakening rule of law negatively affecting the CSO legal environment, and lasting effects of deep economic crisis negatively affecting financial viability.

### 3.1. Citizen engagement in the CEE: decade after the EU accession (2003–2014)

In terms of citizen engagement (both direct and via organised civil society – NGOs and trade unions) the EU accession had only limited effect in the CEE countries. The Copenhagen criteria presumed that democracy in East European member states was fully consolidated and civil society viable. The analysis presented here, challenges this view, especially in terms of financial viability, which continues to be precarious. The EU was to a large extent absent from the citizen engagement. The EU structural funds acted as a polarising factor – widening the gap between professionalised NGOs in CEE capitals able to draw EU funding and the rest (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007). The economic crisis highlighted the degree of dependency of NGOs on state funding for service provision.

The economic crisis acted as a catalyst for citizen engagement in three respects – it challenged civil society and trade unions to define their relationship with the state; it highlighted the need to actively communicate with the public; and establish active ties between organized civil society and the broader public, and civil society and private companies – both to ensure financial viability but also to foster engagement.

In terms of the state-society relations, trade unions, together with NGOs overcame sectoral differences and organised mass level protests against government reforms and austerity measures. By engaging directly with the public, the trade unions were able to assert a more active role vis-à-vis government and to utilize knowledge obtained during their engagement on the EU level (Landgraf and Pleines, 2015). The implementation of EU directives on information and consultation and model of workers councils limited the restriction on trade union ability to protect workers' interests. The more active role of trade unions resulted in increased polarisation – trade unions were for the first time in opposition to the government. This is a positive development, as the CEE trade unions seem to have found their voice and understood the need to build sectoral and regional alliances (Mansfeldova, 2015).

In terms of active communication with the state and the public, NGOs and trade unions sought to overcome the lack of media attention by using alternative means of communication with the public, as well as establishing working relations with the government. In this respect again, the EU frameworks acted as a window of opportunity – implementation of EU legislation was utilized as agenda setting tool, and to overcome government opposition. In this way, citizen participation in policy making and legislative processes grew, especially in areas such as domestic violence, LGBT rights, and fight against corruption.

Here, the example of the Czech Republic highlights the need for continuous involvement of EU in backing and strengthening citizen engagement and organized civil society in the CEE region. In 2012, after large scale scandals uncovering the extent to which the EU funds are being targeted by corrupt practices, the EU froze structural funds for two Czech regions for several months and organized civil society decided to act. In 2013, twenty domestic and international NGOs formed a joint project *Reconstruction of the State* aiming at developing effective anticorruption measures<sup>10</sup>. Unlike previous NGO projects, which failed to challenge the status quo *Reconstruction of the State* continuously monitors voting behaviour of MPs, applies positive incentives – public endorsement and support for politicians willing to publicly commit to supporting anticorruption measures (in the 2014 Senate elections 19 of the 21 elected Senators were openly supporting the project); and negative

<sup>10</sup> The nine key areas on which the *Reconstruction of the State* focuses are: transparent party finance, asset declaration of elected officials, publishing of public procurement contracts online, abolition of anonymous shares, transparent appointment procedure to boards of state companies, independent public administration, protection of police investigation from political inference, transparent legislative process (removal of ad hoc amendments so called limpets) and extension of powers of the Supreme Audit Office.

incentives (naming and shaming strategies in the media and social media), increases the chance of maintaining the political commitment to change.

In terms of establishing active ties to the public and to private companies, the departure of foreign donors, economic crisis combined with the difficult access to EU structural funds, encouraged civil society to seek alternative routes to secure funding. These included using modern technologies (donor SMS), donor portals, more pro-active approach to campaigning for tax deductions, and seeking alternative funding from newly emerging corporate responsibility schemes. As a result CEE civil society landscape became more diverse – a growing gap exists between organisations capable of adaptation and those who struggle on the side-lines.

#### 4. Conclusions

The last two decades have witnessed some of the most profound political, social and economic changes in European history. The fall of communism at the end of the 1980s not only reshaped relations within the continent in the context of rapidly accelerating globalization, but also provided fascinating insights into the potential for, and limitations of, the large-scale reshaping of society.

Today clear and functioning structures had been put in place in Central and Eastern Europe, which were effectively conducive to the European integration. However, there are still several important shortcomings in how CEE societies function – the state–society relationship remains cumbersome and it remains equivocal whether CEE will set off towards Western liberal democracies or cling to the old post-communist East European concept of democracy, where politics is at the service of business interests and related structures.

The economic crisis, which in some CEE countries left behind lasting effects, was mirrored in deepening governance issues and polarisation of CEE societies. One of the roots of the problem is in the bureaucratic nature of the EU accession process itself. The resistance and lack of political will to implement the EU-required norms during the accession process into the legal systems of the CEE countries can account for this negative trend. The implementation of reforms in CEE is conditioned by high degree of good governance, as well as by raising the costs of non-implementation. The example of the anti-corruption NGO alliance in the Czech Republic can serve as an example here – in mobilizing citizens and combining positive and negative incentives the *Reconstruction of the State* increases the costs of non-implementation. Here, the role of EU, although formally limited, is crucial in providing sustained top-down pressure and facilitating bottom-up citizen participation. The success of reforms thus depends on combination of domestic actors, their resources and domestic as well as international context.

This analysis finds that civil society in Central and Eastern Europe should be viewed in dual light. On the one hand, it has an increasingly important role vis-à-vis the state, serving as an arena for contestation of governmental policies and enabling citizen mobilization and participation in an era of democratic backsliding across the region (in particular Poland and Hungary). In addition, CEE civil society has become an ideational alternative to the growing populist ideologies (Seligman, 1992; Arato and Cohen, 1990). On the other hand, the findings presented here support the conclusions of Innes (2014) who also demonstrated that countries previously viewed as democratic success stories are facing serious problems in democratic consolidation. Here, the misfit thesis of Börzel and Risse, is confirmed – CEE countries, with higher degree of initial misfit, experienced higher degree of EU pressure, which led to more lasting changes. The example of Slovakia and its strong civic engagement, which was able to actively challenge authoritarian Meciar government and build lasting ties both within and between the state and citizens, serves as a positive example.

The impact of the economic crisis on the CEE countries was significant, in particular in regard to financial viability of organised civil society as both public funding related to service provision and shrinking private donations. The effect was stronger in countries most affected by the crisis – Hungary, Lithuania and Bulgaria. Furthermore, in the period of the crisis tax related donations dramatically decreased especially in countries heavily hit by the crisis such as Hungary. Corporate funding also decreased, and the competition for public funding grew both within the NGOs and by newly entered service-provision companies challenging the NGOs.

However, economic crisis also acted as an important mobilization factor. In all countries under study, civic participation, enabled by civil society and trade unions increased. New initiatives – in particular those tackling corruption and party campaign finance, saw NGOs focussing their advocacy efforts towards the government as well as actively mobilizing and engaging citizens. On the regional level citizens and NGOs are also more actively engaged in the regional development plans calling for transparency, sustainability and integrity. Slowly establishing are annual advocacy events to broaden awareness to issues such as cancer, homelessness as well as ad hoc (and often EU funded) campaigns for transparency and integrity of the government sector. However the impact of these proactive measures disproportionately benefits the set of established and professionalized NGOs, which active engagement with citizens is more limited than that of smaller NGOs.

This article shows the ways in which the post-enlargement process, especially the economic crisis affected the ability of CEE citizens – both directly, and via civil society organisations and trade unions – to be active participants of the multilevel governance processes. It finds that one of the key remaining gaps of the democratization process remains the relative weakness of state–citizens relationship. The article finds that the effects of the EU in CEE countries were more indirect – EU facilitated citizen participation indirectly by changing opportunity structures for civil society; and precarious – EU structural funding created large differences between civil society organisations able to participate in these new opportunities, and those left behind (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007).

However, the slow changes in terms of emergence of new norms, ideas and collective understandings also took place – such as increased citizen participation and active citizenship. Across the CEE region, we are seeing gradual social learning and internalization of these norms and emergence of new identities – active citizens engaged with (and if necessary in opposition to) the state – directly (public mobilization and protests) and through organized civil society. Organized civil society remains crucial vehicle for citizen participation – providing basis for mobilisation and aggregation of interests, establishing channels of communication between citizens and the state and facilitating deliberation – such as policy consultations and discussions.

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