Supporting civil society and NGOs in Eastern Europe: Some lessons learned

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Introduction
To a certain extent, the transition processes in the countries of Eastern Europe are unique. These countries have a common history of dictatorships which were based upon the principle of democratic centralism, i.e. leadership by the communist parties. The whole society was subjugated to one single political party, which exerted tight control over trade unions, the educational system, the media, churches, businesses and interest groups. In other words, there was no civil society but a party society. The transition process towards democracy in Eastern Europe thus implies a complete overhaul of society. It is often referred to as a transformation process. Instead of organizing society from above, the society has to rearrange itself from below. Initiative should now come from citizens, no longer from the authorities only.

Needless to say, such a fundamental transition takes a long time and is a most complicated process. The seventeen years that have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall are much too short to expect this fundamental change to have been completed. In fact, since the transition is to a large extent a change of mentality, it may take generations before the remnants of the party society have vanished.

In order to support the transformation of East European societies, many international cooperation programmes were established. Various funding schemes

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2 Of course, there were substantial differences between the various former communist countries. For example, in some countries, such as Poland and Hungary, some parts of society enjoyed some liberties, such as small private enterprises and the churches. Furthermore, some countries had multiple political party systems, although they were always tightly controlled by the socialist/communist party.

3 Civil society is defined here as ‘the totality of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force-backed structures of a state (regardless of that state’s political system)’. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups. It is thus much more encompassing than NGOs.

4 This article will not go into details about these programmes.
were created by various international donors, including (Western) governments, international governmental organizations (the EU, OSCE, UN) and international non-governmental organizations (often funded by the former two)\(^5\) and the East European region was virtually invaded by many NGOs, experts and consultants, mostly from Western countries, who came to help ‘create’ civil society in societies unfamiliar with such a concept. The aim of this article is to draw some lessons from this kind of democratization assistance and discuss some dilemmas that have come up. In particular the article will deal with three dilemmas: (1) how to combine a long-term transformation process with short-term support schemes; (2) how to support an endogenous transformation process from outside without distorting it \(?\); and (3) how to effectively work together to support civil society when there are different approaches among donors?

**Short-term international support versus long-term transformation**

As stated, we cannot underestimate the length of transition processes in Eastern Europe. Although lip-service has often been paid to this by the international donor community, in reality many donors did not show much patience. Although in most East European civil society development has only been supported for 10-15 years, many donors have now already substantially scaled down their programmes or even discontinued them. Interest in Western countries in supporting the transition process in Eastern Europe has declined over the last years. The region has become less appealing to the general public and, in particular after 9/11, political interest has shifted towards the Middle East region.

Consequently, many new initiatives that were started with good intentions to strengthen civil society were not given sufficient time to really get off the ground and have not yet become self-sustainable. They had to be closed down when the donors pulled out. Substantial sums of money that had been invested in start-up costs and investments were partly wasted.\(^6\)

This short-term focus has been strengthened by the trend towards result-based development management in development aid. In reply to a demand from taxpayers and parliaments, governments had to indicate the expected outcome of development assistance within a specific time frame and in measurable terms.

Non-governmental donors, who often obtain their resources from these governments, introduced similar planning mechanisms. Although this is, as such, a positive development that has made development assistance more transparent and accountable, the side-effect thereof was that expected results were often

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\(^5\) In this article we will simply refer to ‘donors’.

\(^6\) For example, since the reform of old-fashioned and communist-dominated university structures was considered impossible, too lengthy and too complicated, private educational institutions were created by international donors. However, often a proper self-sustainability strategy that would show how the institutions would eventually be supported by the local market had not been developed. When donors withdraw their support (after some years), these institutions often have to close their doors since completely covering the expenses from tuition fees and local sponsors is not feasible.