

NGOs IN THE NEW EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF POLAND

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PART TWO: THE NGOs AND THE POLISH ROAD TO DEMOCRACY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION.

In this part of my paper I shall examine the place of the NGOs in the Polish transition to democracy and to the EU between 1989 -2004, and the problems of “the third sector” today, when Poland is a EU member.

(i) The early origins of NGOs in Poland.

Between 1944 and 1989 Poland was a communist state although only for 10 years, during the “Stalinist period”, could it be called truly “totalitarian”. From 1956 onwards, ignoring Soviet pressure and claiming partial autonomy within socialism, the communist leaders began to make various concessions to the population. The most important was granting complete internal autonomy and some economic freedom to the Roman Catholic Church and allowing a limited amount of independent Catholic associations and publications to exist. They formed a small but important independent sector which was so-to-speak a standing criticism of the rest of the party-regimented state and society. Later on the visits of the Polish Pope John Paul II, organised by the Church and attended by millions, made the whole nation aware that their primary loyalty was not to communism.

The real development of the third sector (and civil society) became possible in Poland only after the replacement of the communist regime by a liberal-democratic system, which occurred in 1989 - earlier than elsewhere in East-Central Europe. Its ground was prepared some years earlier. From 1968 onwards the Polish people became more and more restless under communist rule, which was mismanaging the centralised, bureaucratic, state and party-controlled economy, causing crises and depressing the standard of living. More people travelled to the West and could compare life there and in Poland. The workers began to strike and to form illegal strike and trade union committees. The intellectuals also became increasingly critical of communism, began publishing “samizdat” newspapers and books, and formed an illegal association called KOR - Committee for the Defence of Workers. In 1980 a strike in Gdansk shipyard led by Lech Walesa, which spread to other cities, forced the government to legalise an independent self-governing trade union “Solidarity” - the first such organisation under communism since the Bolshevik Revolution. Millions

of Poles joined it and under its umbrella began setting up hundreds of independent democratic organisations in town and country - the forerunners of later NGOs.

Although the original aim of the anti-communists was just to create a limited free "civil society" within the communist economy and state, Solidarity quickly evolved into a militant political movement, which was suppressed by a military coup. Nevertheless, for over 7 years, Solidarity lived an illegal, underground existence until eventually, in 1989, after long negotiations, the government agreed to legalise it again and to allow it to participate in a parliamentary election. The Solidarity-sponsored "Citizens' Committees" did so well in the election that the Communist Party gave up power to a non-communist government and dissolved itself. In a few months the 45 years' old communist political structure, the collective economy and the party-controlled system of official "social" organisations was dismantled and (not without turmoil) Poland acquired a liberal-democratic state structure, a market profit-driven economy and a society of independent, autonomous social entities - a true civil society.

Some of the old communist "social" organisations (e.g. trade unions, teachers union, the scout union) survived but in a re-organised, democratic form. Rival bodies, inspired by people once active in the Solidarity movement, sprang up beside them. But a whole host of new independent bodies, responding to new civic problems and social, often local needs, and very similar to western NGOs, also appeared on the scene to form a large third sector.

(ii) The Polish NGOs today.

It is estimated that today Poland has over 20,000 NGOs and about 3 million people working in them - about 8% of the population. The organisations are not evenly distributed; they tend to be concentrated in large or medium-size towns; there are rather thin on the ground in small towns and even more in villages. In general the less well developed districts and provinces (e.g. in north-eastern and south-eastern Poland) have few NGOs. There, the main - sometimes only - centres of civic and social activity are the democratically elected low-level ("gmina" or communal) local-government councils. The reform of local government, soon after the fall of communism, was the work of Solidarity activists and is one of the greatest achievements of Polish transition to democracy. Elderly and middle-age people - brought up in communist times, living on retirement pensions or working hard to maintain their families - are much less involved in NGO activities than younger people. In the last few years the level of involvement throughout the country, even among the young, has noticeably gone down in comparison with the first post-communist years. Women, especially younger ones, are prominent in the third sector, especially the social welfare NGOs.

Although they are fewer of them, Polish NGOs have very similar aims to those in the EU member states in the West ("the old democracies") : self-help; philanthropy (social protection); gender

equality; minority representation; art, culture and leisure; education; children and youth interests. Those concerned with general public issues (e.g. “watch-dogs” against corruption, inefficiency, environmental pollution) are less popular despite frequent and heavy criticism of the ways central and local governments work - in the press and private conversations. Exceptionally, there was a lot of well-organised NGO activity to popularise entry into the EU and particularly during the accession referendum late last year, which was won by a 2/3 majority of the voters.

There are two kinds of voluntary established by law: associations and foundations, and they are both considered to be NGOs. The former were only instituted by the new democratic government; the latter were legally created in the late communist period. Proposals for both must be examined and approved by the courts, and annual income and outlay reports have to be made to the tax authorities and (in case of foundations) to a specified ministry. The formation of an association must be supported by at least 15 members. Their policy-making and executive bodies (boards and offices) are theoretically controlled by an annual general meeting of all members. but this does not always happen. The setting up of a foundation requires one or more founders who must pay a sum of money into a bank account (not necessarily a large one) and who may close down or reorganise the foundation. Executive staff are responsible to boards and boards to supervisory “councils”, normally filled by prominent men and women for long terms. Accounts of both types of organisation are generally kept by professional accountants, but so far seldom published.

Unlike associations, foundations suffer from many difficulties and are often criticised, but none of the governments in power since 1989 has fundamentally reformed the law on foundations. Virtually none have a permanent capital (endowment). the income from which could finance their activities, like e.g. most British and American “charitable trusts”. Like all the associations they live off grants which they have to apply for frequently in order to survive. The richest ones are financed by foreign benefactors, charitable trusts or foundations (e.g. Stefan Batory Foundation or the Polish-American Freedom Foundation). There is a group of foundations, set up by banks or commercial companies, which act just like their private sponsorship agencies. Some foreign governments’ or EU’s programmes are also administered by foundations (e.g. Polish-German Cooperation Foundation).

Even more oddly, Polish government ministries and agencies (e.g. in the health service) have been setting up foundations so that they can receive “voluntary contributions” rather than charge money for their services. Some ministries used to set up nominal foundations to avoid administering their budgets through the normal civil service channels, but this has now changed. Local authorities, universities and other public bodies set up foundations to raise money for special projects. The badly drafted Communist foundation law and lax registration methods allowed, during the first years of market economy, many commercial enterprises to disguise themselves as foundations in order to escape taxes. This has now stopped, but new foundations are still set up more for private rather than public reasons. As a result the three sectors - public, private and

independent non-profit - are hopelessly mixed up and the civic and democratic benefits of the third sector mostly disappear. In fact the foundation sector should probably not be regarded as a NGO sector at all, but called something else. It has some characteristics of civil society - a mixed sector of all kinds of public, semi-public and hybrid institutions - except that the public interest aspect of true civil society is so often ignored in practice.

(iii) Weaknesses of the third sector in Poland.

It is my view, shared by many Polish observers that, despite its growth and achievements since Poland became a democracy, the third sector is not as strong as it should be. Why is this the case and what could have been done - or can be done in the future - to improve the situation? Several factors can be mentioned.

(1) The desire for NGO activity, despite the Solidarity experience, has been weak, except during and just after the dismantling of communism. 45 years of communism, with its collectivist economy, large social welfare programmes and an all-pervasive party-state has accustomed people to having things done for them by politicians and officials. They have now largely accepted private enterprise on the market on the economy and have learned to live with it. But in the public sector things are different. They see democracy - parties, elections and government responsible to parliament - and state institutions as a better way to get things done for them than to try and do more things for themselves and to become more independent of the state.

(2) Polish society has changed dramatically as a result of the last war and post-war frontier changes. It is now probably the most homogeneous in Europe; around 95 % are both Polish and Roman Catholic. Before the war only 2/3 of the population was Polish and there were thousands of other ethnic and religious organisations. Now there is very little need for them.

(3) Poland still has a large agrarian sector compared with western countries. At least 1/4 of the population live in the villages; a large number also in small country towns.

(4) The impulse to develop the NGO sector after 1989 came largely from outside - chiefly the "old democracies" of the EU, the USA and Canada. They supplied ideas and programmes, produced literature, organised training and foreign exchanges, and above all supplied money - a lot of it.

For over 10 years the Soros Foundation of New York was giving the Stefan Batory Foundation in Warsaw 3 - 4 million dollars per year and still more money went to Polish NGOs through other Soros-source channels such as the Open Society Institute. Government-funded American programmes (National Endowment for Democracy and the Democratic and Republican international committees) and the powerful government-funded German party foundations (Adenauer, Ebert and Naumann), and big private foundations like the Bosch, have also contributed millions, as well as advice and know-how. Most of the EU money for Poland so far has gone into public sector reform, regional development and pre-accession programmes, but the third sector

has also benefited a bit. Although this has been vital to the development of the voluntary sector, it has produced an unhealthy dependence of NGOs and foundations on foreign help.

(4) While large foreign corporations working in Poland are sponsoring NGO projects more and more, the big Polish firms are far behind. The large sector of small and medium Polish enterprises so far contributes almost nothing. The lack of tradition of “corporate responsibility” is one reason; another is that most Polish firms are young, need resources for investment and are plagued by high taxes and social security burdens imposed by the government.

(5) The standard of living of most ordinary Polish citizens is still very low, there is unsatisfied hunger for consumer goods and high unemployment. So there is little money for the activities of NGOs and little time for voluntary work. Majority of married women feel their main duty is to their home and family.

(6) The sense of community, even on the lowest level, is weak as a result of communism, which sought to destroy it; there is a lot of suspicion towards others and group egoism which makes social cooperation difficult. Many NGOs are small and weak because they don't like uniting into bigger organisations or federations. This may be a serious handicap to Poland as a EU member because the EU Commission favours big organisations and is not organised to give small grants.

(7) Finally, the country's “educational agencies” - the family, the Church, schools and universities - are very traditional and have not yet taken on board the new requirements of liberal democracy and civil society. Polish family educates children to be good family members, not citizens. The Church teaches them to be good Catholics and good men, but again not so much good citizens. In schools and universities education is very academic, concerned with knowledge rather than social skills, as happens in Britain and North America. Extra-curricular activities such as sport, music, theatre, debating or community voluntary work are neglected. The need to prepare young people for active civic, political or social life is so far hardly recognised.

(8) At their head NGOs don't need “bosses”, bureaucrats or even managers (unless they are big) - they need leaders. Without leaders they are weak and ineffective. Leaders are people who have vision and are able to communicate it, can attract followers and win sympathy of a wider public, know how to form and direct voluntary teams and how to reach goals by persuasion, not coercion and money rewards.

These are partly inborn qualities but mainly skills which can and must be developed through practice and training.

Given the figure of 20,00 NGOs here has been very little systematic leadership training in Poland. Recognising this, and inspired by British examples, I have set up within the framework of a NGO a school for (mainly) young civic, community and voluntary association leaders, once financed by western foundations and government programmes, but recently largely by big business corporations working in Poland. Through its long and short intensive courses it has successfully trained thousands of men and women over the last 10 years, but this is a tiny proportion of the third sector leaders which Poland requires. (See appendix for an overview of the School for Leaders Association.)

(iv) Conclusions and a possible lesson for Turkey.

The growth of the NGO sector in Poland has been fairly impressive and has become an important element of the country's civil society and liberal democracy. But the development has been piecemeal, uneven and rather slow. The many objective historical, economic and social obstacles have been mentioned. In my view much more could have been achieved if there had been a clear and consistently followed strategy of third sector development. Is such a strategy possible? So far no politicians have come up with it, especially no centre-left or centre-right party leaders where a vision of and commitment to civil society might have been expected. The role of the state in creating "social" organisations has been compromised by communism (and earlier corporatism and fascism). A civil society and the third-sector part of it would be something feeble, artificial and false if they were created from above, even by a benevolent liberal-democratic state. But the state can and should help their development, more than just by creating a legal framework. In Poland it has, but only just, started doing it. A law on "public utility organisations" was passed last year, reforming the third sector to some extent. It permits contributions to NGOs and foundations being made from pre-tax income or profit, provided they publish annual reports on their budgets and activities. Another law regulates the status of volunteers and removes various obstacles. More use is to be made of the law which allows public bodies to sub-contract their work to NGOs and treat them as partners rather than just clients of the state. But there is a long way to go before the third sector status receives the support and recognition which it has in Western Europe or North America.

Very recently a Polish strategy has emerged as a result of the work of two foreign-supported foundations - the Stefan Batory Foundation and the Civil Society Trust for Central Europe - both located in Warsaw. The Civil Society Trust is a consortium of leading American Foundations (Soros, Ford, Mott and Rockefeller) which has agreed to provide long-term funding for a SBF-prepared programme of comprehensive development of civil society and the NGO sector in Poland. It makes detailed suggestions and sets out objectives for the social partners of the programme. What is required now is a new political will in the governing elite or strong pressure on it by a large section of the electorate. Let us hope this will happen in the near future.

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