

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

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INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a vital role in all developed democratic countries and in particular in the countries which form the European Union. They are recognised in the EU Constitution and many EU documents and procedures as important for social progress, democratic government and the functioning of EU. Given Turkey's determination to complete internal democracy-building and to become an EU member as soon as possible there is an obvious case for examining the experience of Poland and other post-communist states which in a historically brief period - less than 15 years - succeeded in a transition to both democracy and EU membership.

My paper is in two parts, theoretical and historical. Part One deals with some definitions, the nature of NGOs and the "third sector" to which they belong, and the relation of NGOs to a wider public sphere called "civil society" which forms a necessary part of the modern liberal-democratic state. Part Two deals with the NGOs in contemporary, post-communist Poland, and briefly examines their growth, functioning and some current problems.

PART I: NGOs, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE MODERN LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC STATE.

It is useful, before dealing with Poland, to make some theoretical points about the NGOs and the political context in which they operate since the subject is complex and not always correctly understood. So I begin with a short general section, dealing with the concepts of a NGO, "the third sector", "civil society" and the modern liberal-democratic state and their mutual relations.

(i) The liberal-democratic state.

By this term I mean a state which comprises a developed market economy based on private ownership and a heterogeneous, pluralist society. It consists of a multiplicity of groups, organisations, communities, interests, traditions and ideologies, and has, despite inevitable conflicts and tensions, worked out a way of reconciling the differences in a civilised, non-violent and reasonably harmonious. All this happens within the framework and with the help of the the

state which has the monopoly of legitimate coercion, but whose public authorities (ministers, officials, policemen and soldiers) behave in a certain way. They respect the constitution and the rule of law, recognise various human, civil and political rights and are responsive and responsible to the citizens of the country through free, regular elections, group interest representation and free media.

The roots of such a state are in 18th century Britain and her rebellious North American colonies, which formed the USA. NGOs (under other names) have been part of the liberal tradition from the beginning. They appeared in Continental Europe when it followed the Anglo-American lead and contributed much to the tradition. But much of Europe also rejected liberal democracy between the two World Wars and threw up countless military or ideological dictatorships - corporatism, fascism, national-socialism and communism - where NGOs had little or no chance to function.

(ii) The Non-Governmental Organisations.

What are NGOs and what is their role in the liberal-democratic state? By a non-governmental organisation

(in Britain and the USA also called a "voluntary organisation" or "voluntary association" one normally means a body of people working for some joint public end but not on the order of public authorities and without monetary gain as their main motive. (They are sometimes called non-profit organisations.)

A NGO is born when a group of citizens of a country, without governmental command or other kind of compulsion, forms an organisation to promote a certain common end or to perform a public service. For one reason or another they agree to initiate it themselves and to keep the organisation going through their own effort, themselves contributing or acquiring from other people the necessary resources: ideas, knowledge, time, money, goods or equipment. The alternatives are: (1) realising the goal through the government or some state agency or (2) setting up a commercial, profit-oriented, market organisation, a firm or a company.

Provided that no law is broken there is in principle no limit in a democratic state to the number and character of such civic initiatives. NGOs can produce goods or supply services such as education, healthcare or sport; they can propagate new ideas and values or defend traditional ones; they can advocate causes or policies; and they can do it for the good of their members or the local community or some group of individuals (economic, social, ethnic or religious) or the general public or the whole nation or a foreign nation or all underdeveloped countries or something so global as world peace.

NGOs are sometimes thought to be “non-political”. This is true in the sense that they must not openly or secretly work for a political group which aims to govern the country or force a change of governmental policies through political means. Otherwise they may lose their legal status and the privileges that go with (e.g. not paying taxes). But in a wider sense of “political” NGOs cannot escape politics since virtually everything we do can give rise to a political controversy, e.g. an argument whether the law should allow it.

The question whether a true NGO must be non-profit is also unclear. Some NGOs charge for their services, events they organise, publications they issue. This is normally legal as long as it only covers their costs or if the profit made is used to support its aims and running costs, and does not end up in the pockets of its managers or employees. Many people work for NGOs for nothing. But some, e.g. office workers, are paid regular and quite handsome salaries so they at least profit from NGOs existence and activity.

(iii) NGOs as “The Third Sector”.

NGOs taken together form what is called ‘the third sector’ and in the USA an “independent sector”. The first (or public) sector consists of the institutions of the state and the second (or private) sector of privately owned commercial organisations working primarily for profit. The third sector, although separate, is not wholly independent. It gets legal privileges, facilities and sometimes financial help from the state. The private sector regularly makes contributions to NGOs and in some countries is an important source of funds for many NGOs.

The third or NGO sector is thought to be superior to the other two for many social and political reasons which are good for democracy. The main benefits claimed for the NGOs are the following:

- (1) they step in where the other sectors’ organisations refuse to go;
- (2) they often do things more cheaply and efficiently than other organisations; they know e.g. social needs better and have more sympathy for people needing help;
- (3) even if less efficient they are more flexible and responsive to problems than (especially) large, complex, bureaucratic organisations in the public or private sector;
- (4) they promote cultural, social, political and even economic progress by generating or advocating new ideas and practices;
- (5) they help to develop citizenship by providing opportunities for knowledge and skills (entrepreneurship, management, cooperation) which are useful in both the public and the private sphere;

- (6) they are generally self-governing and democratically structured (which e.g. business seldom is) and are so-to-speak schools of democracy;
- (7) they create pluralism and group solidarity which counteracts often excessive national and state loyalty and collectivism;
- (8) they compensate minorities for their weakness vi-a-vies the state, particularly when public authorities are dominated by unsympathetic social, economic, ethnic or religious majorities or cannot be bothered to cater for the needs of small, local or distant populations.

(iv) NGOs and “Civil Society”.

Those are strong arguments and one could add to them. The trouble is that it is not just the NGOs, in the strict sense of the term, which perform them. There are hosts of other organisations in contemporary societies which are also good for society, democracy and modernisation. There are public bodies with citizens’ participation (e.g. so-called QUANGOs or “quasi-autonomous governmental organisations” in Britain); there are business firms with trade union or employee representation on their boards, as e.g. in Germany under the so-called “Mitbestimmungsrecht”; there are political parties or associations, organised interest groups or lobbies, social movements, trade unions and other professional associations, business organisations, churches, charitable, educational and cultural trusts or foundations, non-state universities or schools, “think-tanks” and citizens’ forums, public and private media, and so on, and so on.

They have some or full autonomy, are often self-governing and voluntary, and perform many of the same services as the NGOs. They provide similar opportunities for innovative ideas or actions, they criticise and challenge the status quo, they propagate and advocate. They compete and cooperate, form coalitions with the NGOs, support them with money, knowledge or training. The NGOs sometimes evolve into one of the other organisations; e.g. an association preaching the importance of unspoilt environment may change into a foundation (when a rich donor has endowed it with capital) or become a political pressure group (so-called public interest lobby) or turn itself into a political party such as the Greens in Germany.

The NGOs possess advantages over the other “socio-political actors”, but they have also handicaps. They are simple and easy to form. They do not need elaborate organisations or big funds to operate as long as their members and supporters are willing to make small, regular donations or organise street collections or give a lot of time without payment. They on the whole have more freedom and autonomy to work, are less oligarchic and closer to the “common man”. The use of the internet makes their work cheap, quick and far-reaching. But they often lack advantages of the other organisations and institutions: well-equipped offices, instruments of

publicity, plentiful money to spend on advocacy and services, etc. It is better for liberal democracy that the NGOs do not stand alone and form a separate sector but are part of a larger, more heterogeneous network with which they interact.

All those groups, organisations and institutions - small and big, poor or rich, amateur or professional, elite or mass in character, local, national or global - together with the NGOs - form an area or arena of “public discourse”. It is “public” in 3 senses of the word:

(1) because the different bodies normally act openly, not in private or secretly, as families, groups of friends, colleagues and acquaintances or as illegal, criminal, terrorist or mafia-type groups operate;

(2) because they communicate with each other - and also cooperate - through contacts, consultations, debates, the press and other media, publications, and so on;

(3) because, directly or not, they deal with or raise issues of wide, general concern.

The governmental process in developed, modern, mass democracies takes place with reference to this public sphere, receives help from and is exposed to it. It is now an essential part of the functioning of the democratic state. The traditional name for this sphere - going back to late 18th and early 19th century - is “civil society” or “civic society” or “citizens’ society” (“societe civile”, “buergerliche Gesellschaft”). It implies that society is not just a collection of people subject to the state, dependent on the state, the state’s clients or beneficiaries. Society, through its members who are citizens, controls and influences the government not through periodic elections and party competition. It solves its problems and satisfies its needs only partially through the state but partially outside it, through all the institutions and organisations of civil society, and of course the market sphere of privately owned and profit-driven commercial enterprises.

In my view it is more useful to talk of four “spheres” rather than three “sectors” of society, as does a contemporary American sociologist called Thomas Janoski in his recent book entitled CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIL SOCIETY. (Cambridge University Press, 1998). He has provided a very useful diagram to illustrate the nature and relations of the four spheres, which is enclosed as an appendix to this paper. It should be noted that the spheres intersect and overlap. Their relative sizes differ from country to country and from period to period in the same country. One major difference between “the old democracies” of Britain, France and Germany and “the new democracies” of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland is the much larger size of the public sphere (civil society) in the former countries.