

Civil Society Actors in Historical Perspective

The Georgian Case

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A Historical Overview: Formation of Georgian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

In Georgia, the formation of the civil society of a modern type started in the middle of the 19th century. This process was instigated by the return to Georgia of young people who received an education in Russia. At this time the first civic organizations appeared that were mostly focused on cultural and educational activities, e.g.: the Organization Spreading Literacy among the Georgian Population.

This stage of the civil society development - 1918-21 – came to an end together with the independence of Georgia. The communist system established after invasion of Soviet Russia in Georgia turned into a totalitarian political regime that did not allow independent public initiatives. Even though civic organizations still existed during this period, but this was just an imitation of civic organizations (trade unions, professional unions, the Young Communist League). These organizations were not voluntary. Instead, they were controlled by the state.

The new wave was started from the 1980's, when the process of "glasnost" and "perestroika" was started in Soviet Union. This period gave people the chances to unite according to the interests and express their positions about different issues. The public movements of that period were mainly about environmental issues and protection of cultural heritage. Organization structure of these associations was weak. But these, some times informal movements, were very much rooted in society and supported by public. They were mostly built on enthusiasm and volunteers. But follow-up political developments towards Georgian independence politicized the process and movements.

Civil Society of Georgia as it is developed for today is mainly determined by recent history of the sector which was started at the beginning of 1990's, when western developmental organizations from the US and Europe started their programs in Georgia to support independence and democratization processes. This was very difficult period for the country accompanied with ethnic conflicts and civic war.

This new process was started with the "mushrooming" of NGOs. A lot of organizations were established (more than 10,000) but only 10-15% of them really were operating. The process was continued by technical assistance and gradual efforts towards institutional development of active NGOs. We can say that for today there are about 350-450 active CSOs in Georgia and they can take over the role for further civil development.

Taking a look back from today's perspective we can say that this historical developments has its positive results.

- The professional level of CSOs is improving and sector is growing;
- The western liberal values prevail;
- Fields of activities are diversified – education, democracy, human rights, conflict resolution, environment protection, women’s problems, minority rights, social problems etc.

But the process was at some extent artificial and forced, and beside positive results it also has negative implications:

- Civic organizations became exclusively dependent on the western financing which endangered their financial sustainability;
- Such dependence made the legitimacy of the sector doubtful - people blamed the sector for introducing foreign principles and having money as main interest;
- CSOs often tried to tailor their activities according to the priorities of these funding agencies;
- The most important weakness of the sector still is that CSOs are not well connected to the grassroots, lack broader support for their agendas

The Role Of The Civil Sector At The Critical Stages Of The Recent History Of Georgia

Civic organizations played an important role during Georgia’s independence and transition periods.

CSOs play important role in our country to develop democratic values. They play important roles on different critical stages for the country.

First of all we can mention the role of the sector during Rose Revolution - and here it is worth to take into account the period before the Rose Revolution i.e. when Shevardnadze’s was in power. Since 2000 the decrease of the popularity of Shevardnadze’s government has become especially notable. In 2003 the government was changed by means of a peaceful but unconstitutional method known as **the Rose Revolution**.

CSOs played an important role in this process.

- Active work of human right organizations played an important role in **challenging legitimacy of the existing government**. By that time, significant expert resources were accumulated in CSOs, so that they could influence the public opinion. It is worth noting that some organizations chose clear confrontation with the government. Formally this did not mean support of any political parties but still, such organizations became politicized and by their activities supported Saakashvili and his party – the National Movement (later on, members of these organizations joined Saakashvili’s team). Nevertheless, many organizations considered political involvement as unacceptable.
- The non governmental sector also played an important role in **proving illegitimacy of the results of the elections held before the Rose Revolution**. Despite the fact that previously (and unfortunately later on) elections had also been falsified, collection of a sufficient volume of materials proving falsification became possible

only for elections held in 2003. CSOs with the use of their own resources and assistance of international organizations managed to organize exit polls, parallel counting of votes and monitoring. As a result, the Supreme Court of Georgia announced that the results of the parliamentary elections were void (the part of elections which was based on party lists). This was mostly achieved through the efforts of non government organizations.

CSOs after the Rose Revolution

It must be noted that these processes had its negative implications to the sector as well. NGO sector after the Rose Revolution was associated with the new government. This perception was even more strengthened by the fact that these NGOs were used by the government as one of the major HR sources. About 40% of the population believed that CSOs have a right to participate in elections just like political parties, while 25% could not answer this question.

In the public perception the significance of CSOs clearly dropped. Besides, the Government also believed that the sector had implemented its function and was not needed any more especially taking into account that part of its expert resources was successfully used by the Government and the opinion of the remaining experts could be neglected.

On the other hand, the donors also decided that under these circumstances most of the financial resources must be used to finance the Government, because this would be a more efficient way of achieving democratic development of the county.

Nevertheless, very soon it became clear that instead of developing democratic institutions and human rights, the new Government focused on strengthening the government institutions. The first signal was given by the constitutional changes made in February 2004, which reduced the rights and authorities of the Parliament and extended the rights and authorities of the President. This was followed by some violations of the human rights"), pressure on the judiciary and media, intolerant attitude towards opponents, violation of property rights etc.

This caused dissatisfaction amongst civic organizations. But the sector lost its influence. and this had several reasons: CSOs loose back-up of international society, which was now actively supporting new "democratic government"; considerable number of "faces "from the sector became governmental officials; media became more controlled; CSOs often failed in creation public discourse on important issues, which are mentioned above (violations of human rights, august war, etc).

It took time to overcome difficulties of these implications. But now we see that sector is recovering. Human rights CSOs became again active, Monitoring function is also increased at some extend, but this is again mostly promoted from international donor society.